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**Peter Timothy Meakin**

**M7221346**

***Sociodramatic Play  
and  
Child Development***

**DOCTOR OF EDUCATION (EdD)**

**2004**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Arising out of a concern for the perceived devaluing of social pretend play in both formal early-years educational environments in particular and in wider western society as a whole, this research seeks to identify and categorise some of the potential developmental benefits of this kind of play activity. It locates and describes five areas of development in particular within which sociodramatic play is seen as having an especially positive effect; these are – cognition, linguistic development, social understanding, identity construction/emotional and moral development, and humour/pleasure. Some of the interconnections and overlaps between these various areas of development are also explored. The research adopts an essentially “naturalistic” approach – collecting, collating and analysing fundamentally qualitative data. It seeks to describe the sociodramatic play of four and five year olds within formal educational settings using both video and audio recordings, as well as semi-structured interviews with some of the relevant personnel. The report also endeavours to theorise about certain elements of social pretend play utilising the five areas of development noted above to help structure and inform its analysis. This work seeks to contribute to an “agenda of concern” about the downgrading of social pretend play, concluding that this kind of activity does assist development in the cognitive, linguistic, emotional, moral and social domains.*

### **(Statement providing explicit justification for the element of originality in this research:**

To the best of my knowledge and ability, the work contained within this dissertation is my own original work. Where I have utilised the work of others, these sources have been explicitly referenced on each and every occasion.)

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Questions being addressed

Having been a professional actor and theatre director for more than twenty years, I am continuously impressed – on an almost daily basis – by the extent to which the arts in general and drama in particular appear to assist human beings in understanding both themselves and the social world in which they live. Paradoxically perhaps, immersion in the “unreal” world of pretence and the arts seems to aid and abet our understanding of ourselves and others in the “real” world. As playwright Arthur Miller would have it: “Nothing is quite so real to us, so extant, as that which has been made real by art” (1965, p. 233). Art, apparently, helps us “to explore the reality of the immense variety of the human condition” (Best, 1992, p. 201). Thus, while working on a soliloquy from *Hamlet* in the rehearsal room, for instance, I am forced to grapple with a whole series of fundamental facets of being human (life, death, endurance, consciousness, etc.) as well as to consider a kaleidoscope of moral, philosophical and ethical implications: to be or not to be, to think or not to think, to act or not to act, to take revenge or not to take revenge, to commit suicide or not to commit suicide, and so on. What is more, the beauty, artistry, humanity and complexity of both the language and the theatricality all help to ensure that such issues are encountered and explored not only with significant cognitive impact but also with tremendous emotive potency as well.

It may seem a long way from the multi-layered riches of the workings of Hamlet’s mind to a pair of five year olds playing at cooking and eating together. However, the two kinds of activity – both, notice, forms of role play – have always seemed more similar than different to me: in the way that humans quite naturally and spontaneously engage in this kind of activity without needing to wonder why; and also in the immense pleasure and sense of fulfilment which both types of role play (the relatively simple and the highly sophisticated) regularly seem to engender. Indeed, it was

precisely this sense of pleasure and fulfilment which was my main motivation – and the motivation of so many of my colleagues – in deciding to work in the theatre: precisely the same motivation, notice, as to why, as a youngster, I so eagerly engaged in pretend play. The sociodramatic play of children and good theatrical performance, then, seem somewhat analogous in the way they each allow participants to engage with “unreality” as though it were “reality intensified” (Fischer, 1973, p. 8). Aspects of living which are so often unconsciously taken for granted in the hurly-burly of life-as-it-is-actually-lived, become the conscious focus and object of our feelings and attention when placed under the microscope provided by pretence and role play. The task of observing and analysing young children engaged in sociodramatic play, consequently, has not been so very different from my role as theatre director when observing and analysing the work of actors. Both have called for a kind of “arm’s length” distancing from the “heat” of the person-to-person engagement and a persistent resort to very basic questions: “What is happening here?”; “Why is this person saying/doing that?”; “What are the consequences of such words/actions upon the ‘giver’ and the ‘receiver’?”; “What meanings are being explored/experienced/extended/communicated by such interactivity?” Thus, while being a professional theatre practitioner might have denied me some of the insights and understandings into children’s play available on a regular basis to, say, an early-years practitioner, it might also have afforded me the informed and practised perspective of one who is well-versed in deconstructing the meanings and significances of humans engaged in make-believe.

However, whilst a day hardly goes by when both the importance and the “naturalness” of engagement in acts of pretence fail to strike me, my work in the theatre also constantly impresses upon me the relatively low political profile and status afforded to the arts in this country. Cultural priorities implicitly and repeatedly seem to restate the “importance” and “value” of areas such as science and technology within our society; the arts meanwhile are relegated to the rather frivolous and eminently dispensable position of

“entertainment or enjoyment” (Best, 1992, p. xii). The broader “mission” of much of my professional work, then – above and beyond the parameters of this study – is to argue persistently for the value to human society of all areas of the arts, be that as diverse as the plays of Shakespeare in the theatre or the social pretend play of children in school.

Might children’s sociodramatic play, I wonder, like theatre and the arts, be thought to have been similarly marginalised in western society? Or, put rather differently, why might research into sociodramatic play be deemed to be educationally relevant and/or important? Initially, of course, such a research focus might seem far removed from the realities and practicalities of everyday classroom experience, but there is a valid argument that the potential importance of sociodramatic play to child development (like the value of the arts to human development) has been drastically overlooked by politicians, policy-makers and a large swathe of educationists in general in recent years (Potter, 1996; Vassilopoulou, 2000). Moyles (1989) probingly asks: “. . . how far is play truly valued by those involved with the education and upbringing of young children?” (p. ix) and notes with concern that in 1988 children in top infant classes in 33 London schools researched were found to spend less than one per cent of their day in “free” play activities (Tizard *et al*, cited in Moyles, 1989, p. 87). It may persuasively be argued, then, that in recent years play has become “ghettoised” (Hadley, 2002, p. 11). This is manifestly at odds with reports issued in the first half of the last century which endeavoured to give a high profile to the arts in general and drama in particular on the curriculum – especially that of primary schools (see, for instance, the Report of the Consultative Committee on the Primary School, 1931, and Primary Education: A Report of the Advisory Council on Education in Scotland, 1946 [cited in Raynor *et al.*, 1989, pp. 282 and 295-6]). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the perceived importance of play was also advocated in the USA: “Between 1890 and 1920, one hundred million dollars was spent on playgrounds in America. Where none had been contrived before, now they were regarded as essential” (Sutton-Smith, 1980, p. 2). Even as recently as the 1970’s, over 200 scholarly articles and dozens



of research books were published on the subject of play during that decade alone (Sutton-Smith, cited in Mellou, 1993, p. 2) and in 1973 the Department of the Environment felt able to comment, “The realisation that play is essential to development has slowly but surely permeated our educational system and cultural heritage” (cited in Smith, 1977, p. 130). Play was regularly recognised as having important developmental and adaptive functions, not only in humans but also in many higher-order animals (e.g. Feitelson, 1977, pp. 7-12; Suomi and Harlow, 1976, p. 491; White, 1977, p. 19). Currently, however, it may be argued that statutory educational provision is being straight-jacketed to deliver a curriculum which is (supposedly) vocationally- and technologically-orientated, “literacy”- and “numeracy”- driven, and almost Gradgrindian in its emphasis on utilitarianism (Soler and Miller, 2003; Wragg, 1999). Put crudely, play today – although often acknowledged as being an important part of out-of-school learning – is seen as being too haphazard, too unplanned and too arbitrary to warrant serious and lengthy inclusion in the curriculum. Its relaxed and enjoyable nature does not encourage the child to develop “the grit and perseverance to pursue a difficult goal with sustained effort. It is all too easy, too much time is wasted in play,” (Guha, 1988, pp. 62-3. Note: this viewpoint is not Guha’s own; this is her summary of the arguments of others). Arguably, the current situation is even worse for young children in England than in various other countries (with the possible exception of the Slovak Republic where, similarly, the prioritising of so-called “academic” areas of knowledge has led to the marginalisation of social pretend play [Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2004, p. 275]). The *Desirable Outcomes for children’s learning on entering compulsory schooling* document for England (SCAA, 1996) emphasises “early literacy, numeracy and the development of personal and social skills” (p. 1, cited in David, 1998, p. 61). Similarly, Margaret Hodge MP in her foreword to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority’s *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (2000) advocates analogous educational objectives for this age group: “The foundation stage is about . . . developing early communication, literacy and numeracy skills that will prepare young

children for key stage 1 of the national curriculum” (2000, p. 2). No reference is made, notice, to the desirable development of children’s emotions at this stage nor to the importance of the affective domain within educational progression. Compare, however, the Welsh document for the “desirable outcomes” of early years education published in 1996. This quotes Gerallt Lloyd Owen’s epic poem, *Afon (The River)* where he longs for the magic of early childhood. The Welsh document tells us that this is the time of life “when the world is there to be explored and the adventure of discovery is all around” (Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales, cited in David, 1998, p. 61). Moreover, the Welsh paper contains a specific section on “the importance of play” advocating play’s significance for desirable development in early childhood. The English guidelines contain only a few passing references to play (David, 1998, p. 61). Tricia David sums up the differences in attitude towards play and child development on either side of Offa’s Dyke very poignantly and pertinently: “It would seem that being under five in England is to be less joyful, less celebrated, less imaginative, less romantic, more pressurised, more rigid, more directed – especially towards literacy and numeracy – than early childhood in Wales” (1998, p. 61). David’s line of argument is in disagreement with that propounded by Bennett *et al* (1997) who contend that research does not provide support for the developmental benefits of adult-less play and that, consequently, its right to be included in the formal educational curriculum deserves to be questioned: “The value of play to young children’s learning is not borne out by empirical evidence and, in spite of its continued endorsements, its place in the curriculum remains problematic” (1997, p. 1). This in spite of the fact that a variety of research evidence indicates that a child-centred curriculum in the early years is more likely than a teacher-directed, more formal approach to have positive and lasting benefits for child development (see Guimaraes and McSherry, 2002, p. 87) and that play forms the basis for such a child-centred pedagogy: “Play is the natural way in which children go about the business of learning,” (Fisher, cited in Guimaraes and McSherry, 2002, p. 87). Indeed, Bennett *et al* themselves – within four pages of the above quotation – confess, “There is substantial

evidence for the benefits of fantasy or sociodramatic play” (1997, p. 5). In order for play to attain and sustain a more secure and more highly valued position in formal educational settings, then, the children must be exposed to a philosophy of education – comparable to that espoused by John Dewey in the early decades of the twentieth century – which permits them, at least in part, to explore, experiment with and construct their own learning situations (Soler and Miller, 2003, p. 59). This kind of environment is rather less likely to be found in a political climate which argues, to quote Chris Woodhead, the former H. M. Chief Inspector of Schools in England, that, “Direct teaching is, however, crucial at this age [i.e. early years] as it is at every other age” (cited in Guimaraes and McSherry, 2002, p. 86). In the face of such dogma, we perhaps should not be surprised – if no less alarmed – that both Johnson (2000) in England and Guimaraes and McSherry (2002) in Northern Ireland concluded that certain early years environments – namely reception classes – offered a curriculum based mainly on direct instruction in which most of the activities were structured and initiated by adults (cited in Guimaraes and McSherry, 2002, pp. 92-3).

However, even though reception class teachers in England regularly complain about a curriculum overcrowded with initiatives such as the Literacy and Numeracy Hours, leaving little room for more “creative” endeavours (Broadhead, 2003), some might argue that the importance of play in early years education has recently come to be emphasised once again in English political thinking. Such people might cite the replacement of the previously-mentioned Desirable Learning Outcomes with QCA’s Foundation Stage Curriculum spanning the period from three years of age to the end of the reception year (in spite of the emphases given by Margaret Hodge MP – and referred to above – in her foreword to the QCA document). This document – *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA, 2000) – contains a specific section devoted to “Play” and the developmental, semiotic, intrapersonal, communicative, co-operative, emotional, creative, problem-solving and therapeutic benefits of play outlined in the document are all features which I – and many early-

childhood practitioners – would wish to endorse and support (Soler and Miller, 2003, p. 61). Furthermore, examples of how play – and, often, role play in particular – can assist learning and teaching within all six areas of “an appropriate curriculum” are detailed. These include specific illustrations within personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development and creative development. The presence of play remains recurrent and explicit in the QCA documentation which has supplemented the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (2000). Both *Planning for Learning in the Foundation Stage* (QCA, 2001) and *Foundation Stage Profile* (QCA, 2003) contain specific, detailed guidance on the importance of play and ways in which practitioners might optimise and assess its effectiveness. Perhaps even more heartening (and surprising) is the news that government ministers are not ruling out the possibility that elements of the “new, play-based Foundation Stage” might be extended into Year 1 of the National Curriculum (Ward, 2003, p. 7). It remains to be seen whether such recent political initiatives will be successful in helping to re-establish the importance and the centrality of play within the Foundation Stage and beyond. For this to be achieved, teachers themselves must feel willing and able to incorporate appropriate practice within their crowded and initiative-laden curriculum, and teacher-training itself, of course, must include and emphasise the importance and utility of play (Broadhead, 2003). Moreover, in spite of the promises inherent in the new English Foundation Stage Curriculum, it continues to lay emphasis on more formal teaching and assessment approaches and, in comparison with early childhood curricula in countries such as New Zealand and Italy, play might still be deemed to be relatively “marginalised” (Soler and Miller, 2003, p. 66). Indeed, Ofsted itself reports how some headteachers in England would like to include more play-based learning for their six year olds but feel unable to do so “because of anxiety that this might jeopardise hard-won gains in standards in the core subjects” (2003, p. 8). This is in contrast to the levels of independence in deciding appropriate provision experienced by headteachers in Denmark and Finland, where

curricula are less rigidly prescribed and professional autonomy is more “highly prized” (Ofsted, 2003, p. 5). In the meantime, however, it is hoped that a work such as this will assist in further underlining for politicians and practitioners alike the potential (and potent) benefits of, in particular, sociodramatic play for the early-years age range.

In the light of the perceived curricular “downgrading” of pretend play, then, the questions central to this research will not only include ones which ask what kinds of development are nurtured through young children’s sociodramatic play and how they interrelate, but also how do these various “strands” of development manifest themselves in the social pretend play of children? What do they look like? What forms do they take? What evidence can be obtained from the naturalistic observation of children’s sociodramatic play that various, complementary strands of development are, in fact, taking place? Bearing all these points in mind, it may be possible to refine these diverse areas of concern and curiosity into three essential questions forming the basis of this research and providing its prime *raison d’être*:

1. What types of development are nurtured through children’s sociodramatic play?
2. How do these aspects of development manifest themselves during sociodramatic play?
3. How might these various types of development interrelate during sociodramatic play?

It may be worth commenting at this point on the apparent anomaly that research which places such emphasis on “development” is not longitudinal and examines only one particular age group at one particular point in time. However, developmental research which is not longitudinal is by no means uncommon (Schaffer, 1996, p. 3) nor is it without value and validity: “Such work is . . . essential to any effort to arrive at a developmental formulation,

for if we are to make statements about change we need to know just what it is that changes” (Schaffer, 1996, p. 3).

It will come as no surprise in the light of what has already been said that, although the intention is for the research to be primarily descriptive in character, it will also contain passages of explanation, as well as attempts to evaluate the learning processes and theorise about the data – the ultimate aim being, as previously stated, to help create an “agenda of concern” (Tizard and Hughes, 1991, p. 36) about the ways in which pretend play has been “downgraded” (in both specific curricular terms and also in wider political perspectives) in recent years. The proposed audience for this research, therefore, as well as including practitioners themselves, will also ideally incorporate politicians and policy-makers.

### **Main Literature Sources identified, read and referred to**

As will be detailed in due course, my reading and my field work have led me to compartmentalise the purported benefits of children’s sociodramatic play into five (albeit overlapping, complementary and, arguably, transactional) categories. (Please note: in the writing of this report I use the first person, emphasising the “researcher-as-instrument” position [Ball, 1993, p. 46]). It is perhaps worth saying that no readings that I have come across use precisely this form of categorisation. Sutton-Smith (1980, p. 9), for instance, identifies four developmental areas located within play theories – specifically: autonomy, cognition, affect and communication – areas which can be seen as having similarities with, but which are not identical to, the five categories I have identified.

It is to be noted that, in order to try and produce as coherent and convincing an argument for the benefits of sociodramatic play as possible, I initially endeavoured to reproduce broadly similar categories for investigation as those outlined by Sutton-Smith – namely, the cognitive, the linguistic, the social and the emotional. I decided not to investigate other potential areas of benefit – such as the physical (Broadhead, 2003) – in the belief that, in

formal curricular terms at least, such spheres were afforded a similarly low political profile as that given to social pretend play. However, my field work – even from as early as the pilot project in 1999 – refused neatly to conform to my proposed structure and, as will be discussed in detail later, it was especially the rather thorny issue of sociodramatic play and humour which repeatedly insisted on making its presence felt. As a result of these multifarious considerations, the five categories I eventually utilised (and which proved to be of particular assistance in addressing my three research questions) may be described as:

1. Sociodramatic play and *cognitive development*.
2. Sociodramatic play and *language development*.
3. Sociodramatic play and *perspective taking/social cognition*.
4. Sociodramatic play and *identity construction/emotional and moral development*.
5. Sociodramatic play and *humour/pleasure*.

My reading, therefore, has involved exploration of these five broad areas of development both with and without regard to their possible connection with children's pretend play. The texts I have read and used are all, of course, detailed in the *References* section. However, it should also be noted that I have not given equal attention to all five categories but, rather, have chosen to focus, as my research has progressed, on those areas which have emerged as being of most significance and interest within my findings and subsequent discussion and which I consider to make the most original contribution to the existing literature. My research, as a result, has paid particular attention to linguistic and social and emotional development as well as to the relationship between sociodramatic play and humour/pleasure.

The utilisation of these five categories has also informed the way I have structured the actual writing of this work. The *Literature Review*, in effect, is sub-divided into 5 separate, but overlapping, accounts of each of the developmental domains under scrutiny. Each of these sub-sections has, in

turn, been sub-divided again to include, initially, an overview of the domain in question before proceeding to a more detailed analysis of the relationship of the particular domain to sociodramatic play itself. The *Field Work* chapter is sub-divided into a number of sections detailing a variety of methodological and ethical issues connected with this research. This is followed by a *Discussion* of my findings in which the analysis and the discussion of the data have been conflated in the hope that the material will be more readily understandable and accessible to the reader. Lastly, the overall findings and recommendations of this research are detailed and summarised in the *Conclusion*. Examples of research instruments I have used are included as *Appendices*.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Before attempting to analyse and evaluate the major readings I have undertaken, it may be helpful to use the literature to attain acceptable definitions of some of the central concepts of this research which can then be operationalised during the field work. Many writings attempt to define “play” *per se* (e.g. Bax, 1977; Tan-Niam, 1998) but perhaps the most useful parameters to determine what constitutes play are provided by Garvey (1990). She sees play as having certain characteristics which are partially typical of states *other than* play: it is pleasurable; its goals are entirely intrinsic – it serves no obvious utilitarian purpose; it is spontaneous and voluntary; and it involves some active engagement on the part of the player. The final item Garvey includes in the inventory is perhaps what most helps to give play its unique quality (and which is, possibly, also the easiest to overlook) – that is, “play has certain systematic relations to what is not play” (pp. 4-5). Play, in other words, is integrally related to aspects of life which are “non-play”.

“Sociodramatic play” is, of course, a subtype of “pretend” or “fantasy” play. As Mellou (1993) observes, pretend play can be either solitary or social in nature – whereas sociodramatic play, arguably, can only occur when two or more people are playing together. This may, of course, involve play between adult(s) and child(ren) (i.e. play within *asymmetrical* relationships [Open University, 1999, p. 92]) but, for the purposes of this study, I have chosen to concentrate upon play between two or more children (i.e. play within *symmetrical* relationships [Open University, 1999, p. 92]; see below for the reasons behind this decision). Sociodramatic play, furthermore, is not only a subtype of pretend play *per se* but also, of course, a subtype of social pretend play necessitating, as it does, the adoption of dramatic roles and the utilisation of plot-lines by participants (Garvey, 1990, p. 79). Other types of social pretend play might involve no such role-playing but might include, for instance, children engaging in joint pretence through the use of dolls or

vehicles (Feitelson, 1977, p. 6). (This is not, of course, to imply that dolls, vehicles and other objects are not a frequent, and very important, feature of sociodramatic play.) But perhaps the prime defining characteristic of sociodramatic play (as opposed to other forms of imaginary play) is not that it simply requires two or more people to participate in symbolic play simultaneously, but that they must assume complementary roles and they must co-operate together in developing a single scenario. Successful sociodramatic play is a shared, co-ordinated activity, necessitating moment-by-moment co-operation at both communicative and metacommunicative levels (Garvey, 1990, pp. 128-130).

However, surely Mellou (1993) is incorrect to assert that sociodramatic play usually refers to the adoption of roles from real life (i.e. the play has leanings towards “social realism”) whereas “dramatic play” also includes imaginary or fantasy settings (p. 22)? How can one make a distinction in children’s play between situations taken from “real life” and those taken from “imaginary or fantasy settings”? Are not all their fictitious settings, to some degree, fantastical? When does anyone observe children’s play which is located wholly within their “real-life”, immediate, current, first-hand experiences (Garvey, 1990, p. 60)? When, for instance, does one observe nursery school children in a nursery school playing at being nursery school children in a nursery school? In my pilot study in 1999 I observed four children playing in a fictitious home setting with two of the girls taking on the maternal, caring roles. Would Mellou regard this as sociodramatic, rather than dramatic, play? This hardly holds up to scrutiny because the two boys involved were both pretending to be puppy dogs – are these to be classed as roles from “real life” or as “fantasy” roles? Surely, then, the chief distinction between sociodramatic and dramatic play does not lie in the source material for these types of play as Mellou asserts, but in the fact that sociodramatic play is necessarily: (i) social, and (ii) mutually achieved.

The second phrase in the title of this work requiring definition and clarification is, of course, “child development”. This can be categorised as

something more than just “change”. It also infers that development is “*progressive*, moving the child towards a greater state of competence, maturity and stability” (Open University, 1991, p. 8). Rather more problematic, however, is the paradigm of development which one adopts in seeking to clarify how learning occurs and how development might best be understood. A “behaviouristic” approach may be seen as inadequate due to the priority it places on the learning conditions rather than the individual learner’s feelings, experiences and understanding (Open University, 1994a, p. 44). Likewise, a “constructivist” perspective on development may be useful in the emphasis it lays on the child as an active “constructor” of knowledge but its utility to the present purposes may well be lacking as it subordinates the roles of language and social interaction (both, of course, fundamental to sociodramatic play) to predetermination by the child’s stage of cognitive development (Wood, 1998, pp. 24-5). Our most useful perspective on child development, therefore, is probably the “social constructivist” as exemplified by the likes of Vygotsky (1991) and Bruner (1989, 1991). The centrality which this approach affords to language, social interaction and cultural practices in shaping human development (Pollard, 1994, p. 13; Wood, 1998, p. 39) may well be the most pertinent, as well as the most persuasive, to the dictates of this particular piece of research. The following social constructivist notions need thus to be borne in mind:

1. The direction of learning passes from the social to the individual, from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal.
2. Speech is the realisation as well as the encapsulation of pre-existent thinking.
3. Individuals are assisted across their various zones of proximal development by the “scaffolding” provided by more expert others.

These elements of social constructivism should all adequately map on to, as well as help provide the necessary tools to analyse, the research area I am exploring (Wood, 1998, pp. 26-39; Open University, 1994a, pp.49-52).

## **1. Cognitive Development**

Various paradigms of cognitive development (such as both the constructivist and the social constructivist referred to a moment ago) characterise it as the progression from “concrete” thinking which is embedded within the immediate tangible realities surrounding the child, to “higher”, more esoteric, “disembedded” forms of thought. Cognitive development is conceptualised as a movement away from unconscious interaction with the physical and the “at hand”, towards mental operation within the realms of the abstract and conceptual. It is a development which progresses, in Donaldson’s words, “beyond the bounds of human sense” (1978, p. 123). Donaldson’s view is ultimately based on Piaget’s constructivist critique of intellectual development which sees the mind as developing through a predictable sequence of stages until a fourth and final period is reached where the adolescent is able to think conceptually, in a way that is “no longer limited exclusively to dealing with objects or directly representable realities, but also employs hypotheses” (Piaget, 1991, pp. 10-11). Hypothetical thinking (involving, as it does, conscious rather than unconscious mental operation) can, at times, be characterised as “thinking about thinking” which Bruner defines as “metacognition” (1985), or as “like the mind turning back upon itself” (1989, p. 44).

What essentially distinguishes the constructivist approach to cognitive development from the social constructivist, though, is not so much the nature of that development (in both cases it is from concrete thinking towards the more abstract) but rather the direction in which that development takes place. For Piaget, intellectual progression is a result of the individual dynamically acting upon his/her immediate environment – learning, in a sense, is seen as emanating outwards from the individual to the world at large. For the social constructivist, however, the direction of development is reversed – learning is something which initially occurs “out there” and which is then “internalised”, its direction is from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal (Wood, 1998, pp. 26-39; Open University, 1994a, pp. 49-52). According to Mead (1934), one of the earliest proponents

of what we now label social constructivism, the very act of thinking is something which is socially constructed, thinking is the assimilation of common, social, cultural meanings. Indeed, it is claimed by Mead that the accomplishment of higher, conceptual thinking occurs through the adoption of the social perspective: “In abstract thought the individual takes the attitude of the generalised other [in other words, ‘society’]” (p. 155).

So, if one deems cognitive development to be characterised not only by the progression from concrete to disembedded thinking but also by its socially-constructed nature, what are the implications of this for the analysis of shared pretend play and intellectual development? Is there any evidence to suggest that sociodramatic play assists in the internalisation of understandings originally acquired in external, social situations? Or, in Light and Perret-Clermont’s terms, that shared meanings are established during play interaction leading, ultimately, to the development of internalised thought (1991, p. 137)? It is worth bearing in mind in this context that at least one reputable study (Johnson *et al*, 1982, cited in Smith *et al*, 1998, p. 197) concluded that whilst “constructive” play (for example, building with “Duplo” bricks) was indeed “positively and significantly correlated with intelligence scores”, “sociodramatic” play, significantly, was not. Are the cognitive benefits to be gained from other forms of play, then, not to be accessed through participation in social pretend play?

### **1a. Sociodramatic Play and Cognitive Development**

We unashamedly confess to entertaining the plausible hypothesis that the evolution of play might be a major precursor to the emergence of language and symbolic behaviour in higher primates and man [*sic*].

(Bruner, Jolly and Sylva, 1976, p. 21)

This short quotation encapsulates two essential features of this literature review: the first is that play is frequently seen as preceding, and possibly even precipitating, both language development and symbolic behaviour. For

instance, Bates *et al* (1975) noted that referential speech emerged only a few weeks after the first instances of symbolic play and the capacity for internally representing absent objects (cited by Rosenblatt, 1977, p. 41). The second pivotal aspect of the above quotation is that the emergence of language and symbolisation are inextricably inter-related and, one might add, ultimately help facilitate the development of abstract, conceptual thinking. With regard to the latter feature, Garvey (1990, p. 42) sees linguistic and symbolic development as almost being part and parcel of the same thing: just as the child becomes able to represent an object or an event with a word, so the symbolic mode of representation likewise enables the child to use an object to “stand for” another object. (The importance of play for language development will be investigated later.)

The notion that play, by fostering linguistic and symbolic development, actually helps engender the onset of abstract, conceptual thinking must be elaborated further. This complementary spiral of development – involving pretend play, symbolisation, language and hypothetical thinking – is particularly conspicuous throughout the second year of life as the child learns to engage in make-believe (Garvey, 1990, p. 44). In attempting to understand the interconnectedness of play/representational thinking/language development/conceptualisation – and thus to address my third research question: “How might . . . various types of development interrelate during sociodramatic play?” – it is imperative to acknowledge that to engage in pretend play is to operate on two levels of reality simultaneously: the concrete, immediate world and the hypothetical, conceptual world (Bretherton, 1984, p. xi; Moyles, 1989, p. 6; Piaget, 1962, p. 98). Fantasy play, that is, involves movement from the here-and-now to symbolic enactment (Perlmutter and Pellegrini, 1987). If I use a stick to represent, say, a rifle I am still aware that the stick is a stick; however, I am also engaging in an “as if” situation and am hypothesising (or pretending) what could be enacted if I were actually holding a rifle. To use Vygotsky’s terminology, I am using the stick as a “pivot” “in order to sever the meaning of the action from the real action” (1976, p. 548). Smith (1977) makes the

same observation: “A child is not just tearing up pieces of paper; he [*sic*] is making bus tickets . . . Fantasy play . . . seems to rely on an awareness of the symbolic or intentional value of action” (p. 124). In utilising the pieces of paper as bus tickets the child is not, it must be noted, using the paper as symbols *per se* but, rather, as props which enable the child to participate in imaginative activity (as opposed to detached, abstract thinking). Hence Potter’s (1996) observation that: “. . . the child’s use of substitute objects [during pretend play] is a first step in the transformation of the perception of objects of action to objects of thought or ideas” (p. 13). The use of the stick as a rifle, then, or the pieces of paper as bus tickets are “a step towards symbolisation but not actually symbolisation, . . . a pivot towards abstract thought but it is not yet clear abstraction,” (Vassilopoulou, 2000, p. 56). D. W. Winnicott (1971) makes a similar observation when analysing small children’s use of “comfort” items, or what he terms, significantly, “transitional objects”: “It is true that the piece of blanket (or whatever it is) is symbolical of some part-object, such as the breast. Nevertheless, the point of it is not its symbolic value so much as its actuality” (1971, p. 7). This distinction is critical for Vygotsky. We must not, he cautions, regard the child playing imaginatively as “an unsuccessful algebraist who cannot yet write the symbols on paper, but depicts them in action” (1976, p. 540). Rather, play functions as a transitional stage (1976, p. 547) in the child’s progress towards more esoteric, disembedded ways of thinking and operating. Vygotsky cites the example (1976, p. 547) of an adult who can put down a match and state, “This is a horse”. Here, the adult is operating entirely within the realm of the symbolic. A young child cannot do this. A child must be able to use the prop, in play, in order to sever the meaning from the object during action<sup>1</sup>. Thus, a postcard cannot be a horse in play, but a long stick can (1976, p. 547). With regard to the transitional function

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<sup>1</sup> Wolf and Grollman (1982) have argued that a child’s preference for using a tangible prop rather than a word or gesture to help create a fictive world is symptomatic of cognitive style rather than the developmental level of functioning (cited by Bretherton, 1984, p. 21). This would appear difficult to determine and would also be at odds with Vygotsky’s claim that the concrete “pivot” is an integral feature of transitional development towards independent, higher-order, detached thinking.

of object play, it is worth noting that, as the child cognitively matures, s/he becomes less dependent on the perceptual and physical properties of objects in promoting pretend play (Garvey, 1990, p. 96) – the child, for instance, when using a torch to represent a gun (rather than a pretend gun itself) may already be regarded as progressing towards more abstract, less embedded, ways of thinking and behaving (Rosenblatt, 1977, pp. 36-38).

One can see the relevance of a social constructivist (as opposed to a constructivist) approach to development here, as detailed above. The learning experience initially occurs “out there” through the child interacting with objects in a non-literal manner. Only later is this understanding internalised. As Freire observes, “The act of knowing involves a dialectical movement that goes from action to reflection and from reflection upon action to a new action” (1989, p. 48). Lunzer (1989) likewise notes how “performance generally precedes awareness” (p. 30). Vygotsky makes a similar point with specific reference to play: “Play is converted to internal processes at school age, going over to internal speech, logical memory, and abstract thought” (1976, p. 548). To return to the example of the horse in play, whilst one would hesitate to claim that the child is unable to imagine a horse-ride until s/he has fictitiously enacted such an event, it would be good advice to remember Vygotsky’s guidance that, “It is nearer the truth to claim that imagination in adolescence and later is ‘make-believe play without action’ than it is to claim that make-believe play in young children is ‘imagination in action’” (Britton, 1989, p. 212).

The severance of meaning from actuality during pretend play, then: (i) occurs in congruence with language development, (ii) is a precursor to the dawn of symbolisation and, (iii) ultimately helps engender the ability to use abstract, conceptual thought. Thus, whilst accepting that not only symbolic play, but also “deferred imitation, mental images, drawing . . . and, above all language itself” (Piaget, 1991, p. 9) are all examples of representational thinking, one can hardly accuse Vygotsky of hyperbole when he states that: “Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal



development. . . . [Play is] the highest level of pre-school development. The child moves forward essentially through play activity” (1976, p. 552).

A second significant benefit arising out of the conjunction between pretend play and cognitive advancement (which also connects with issues of social development) has been argued for as well. It can persuasively be claimed that our representational understanding of the world occurs not so much in “taxonomic structures or classification hierarchies”, as Piaget claimed, but rather in terms of “event schemata or scripts that are skeletal frameworks of everyday events” (Bretherton, 1984, p. 5). “A *schema* is an organisational form for the knowledge we have about a particular concept” (Andre, 1989, p. 68). Another mode of understanding this way of mentally representing experience is to see the schemata as “stories” or “narratives” which help shape and structure our view of the world. That is, arguably, we make sense of what we do and what happens around us by ordering and presenting these occurrences to ourselves in terms of narrative, plot, drama. Thus our propensity for making sense of social events through a form of mental “script-writing” can be conceived of as a major link between our sense of self and the social world of which we are a part: “Life could be said to imitate art” (Bruner, 1989, p. 46; see also Fox, cited in Open University, 1994b, p. 90). Bretherton makes the same point; these narratives “are figurative in that they represent spatio-temporo-causal links among agents, recipients, and objects and are in this sense isomorphic with reality” (1984, p. 5).

The fact that our understanding of the world is organised into “scripts” means, of course, that not only can we recreate those same scripts and understandings in our pretend play but, more crucially, we can alter, refine, distort, reshape them as well (Bruner, 1989, p. 43). As Piaget (1962) has claimed, in play children go beyond the confines of the perceptual field and thus can refigure reality according to their wishes and subordinate it to the ends they wish to achieve (cited in Bretherton, 1984, p. 36). Sutton-Smith (cited by Moyles, 1989, p. 165) describes how play “schematises life”:

children are able to create and master their own narratives and thus begin to gain some control over their own realities. He goes on to state that, “It has been a great mistake of Western theorising to see play as simply an imitation of life” (cited by Moyles, 1989, p. 165). For Vygotsky (1976), children’s ability to reconfigure reality in play was an essential function of make-believe activity: “The creation of an imaginary situation is not a fortuitous fact in a child’s life; it is the first effect of the child’s emancipation from situational constraints” (1976, p. 548). Play, he argued, “is invented at the point when unrealisable tendencies appear in development” (1976, p. 538). And thus play enables children to create symbolic alternatives to reality (Bretherton, 1984, pp. 32 and 38). This ability can be seen as synonymous with the ability “to engage in ‘serious’ mental trial and error” and thus to create mental alternatives prior to action (Bretherton, 1984, p. 36). It can persuasively be claimed that this ability – to manipulate symbolically narratives prior to their actual commencement – is of fundamental importance to human beings. Before a job interview, for instance, how often do we mentally “replay” a whole host of possible scenarios, thus helping to ensure our preparedness prior to the interview itself? Once again, then, the necessity of play to the development of decontextualised thought can be argued for. Not only is play important for the engendering of the semiotic ability, allowing for the development of both abstract thinking and linguistic functioning, but it is also of use in allowing children to structure and reshape event schemata and create hypothetical “other worlds”. This ability connects with the therapeutic potential of pretend play which shall be discussed in the section on Identity Construction/Emotional and Moral Development. Through acquiring some mastery over their own narratives, children are likely to benefit from increased control over their environments and thereby profit from improved self-esteem. As Broadhead (2004) notes, role play allows children to engage “in a personally controlled way, with events that have made them fearful, anxious, angry” (p. 17). Thus cognitive, linguistic and emotional advancement may all be seen to interrelate positively during sociodramatic play – and this must go some way towards answering my third research

question concerning the interconnectedness of social pretend play and different strands of development.

Many writers (e.g. Clark, Griffing and Johnson, 1989; Garvey, 1990; Guha, 1988; Hutt and Bhavnani, 1976; Mellou, 1993; Moyles, 1989; NACCCE, 1999) have linked the ability to “play” with another aspect of cognitive development – namely, creativity: “Lieberman (1977) . . . and others have found some evidence that playfulness, and a disposition for pretend play, correlate with creativity” (Smith, 1988, p. 194). Early *unplayfulness*, on the other hand, has been linked with a lack of originality in later life (Bruner, Jolly and Sylva, 1976, p. 17). Bruner stresses that all forms of play are potential sources of novelty (cited in Sylva and Lunt, 1982, p. 169). In play, the child can explore, experience flexibility and take advantage of the materials and opportunities at hand in order to create new combinations and novel situations: “Through creating new objects, paintings, models, shapes, [and, one might add, sounds and words – see the section on language development below], a child takes his [*sic*] first steps towards creativity” (Sylva and Lunt, 1982, p. 169).

“Creativity”, however, is a notoriously difficult concept to define. It may be thought of as possessing various component parts including the ability to think divergently, to be ideationally fluent, to be good at solving problems, and so on. On the other hand, there is the “common-sensical” assumption that creativity is linked with a dearth of rigorous, logical thought and a lack of structure and formal command of the medium in which one is working. It is, rather, associated with a sense of “letting go” (NACCCE, 1999, pp. 7 and 10). Many writers, however, have been concerned to demonstrate that, far from being removed from rigour in knowledge and understanding, creativity is, in fact, inherently linked to the ability to think fluently, inventively, experimentally and effectively (e.g. Best, 1992; Bruner, Jolly and Sylva, 1976; Clark, Griffing and Johnson, 1989; Garvey, 1990; Hutt and Bhavnani,

1976; Mellou, 1993; Moyles, 1989; NACCCE, 1999)<sup>2</sup>. The results of Wallach and Kogan's study (1965) found creativity to be characterised by divergent thinking consisting of ideational fluency and unique responses. Convergent thinking, on the other hand, was identified as thought directed toward producing a single answer to a difficulty (cited in Vandenberg, 1980, p. 60).

Significantly, the empirical work of Sylva, Bruner and Genova (cited in Bruner, Jolly and Sylva, 1976, p. 16) demonstrated the link between playfulness and problem-solving (which can be viewed as one aspect of "creativity" [Bruner, Jolly and Sylva, 1976, p. 15]). The researchers worked with children aged three to five who had the task of fishing a latched box out of reach. To do so, they had to extend two sticks by clamping them together. The children were divided into four groups and each group was given a different "training" procedure before embarking upon the task. One group was given a demonstration of the principle of clamping two sticks together, another was afforded practice in fastening clamps on single sticks, and another was given the opportunity to watch the experimenter carry out the task. The fourth group was simply allowed to play with the materials. This final group "did as well in solving the problems as the ones who had been given a demonstration of the principle of clamping sticks together and better than any of the other groups" (Bruner, Jolly and Sylva, 1976, p. 16). Smith and Dutton (1979) used a modified form of Sylva, Bruner and Genova's task with four year olds and similarly concluded that play can help promote insightful tool-use and problem-solving (cited in Vandenberg, 1980, p. 58).

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<sup>2</sup> What appears problematic to some writers (e.g. Hutt and Bhavnani, 1976, p. 219; Moyles, 1989, p. 80) is the notion that "creativity" can take various guises and appear in a variety of knowledge domains: "How do we correlate the inventive activities and output of a famous scientist [and] a famous artist?" (Moyles, 1989, p. 80). One might hypothesise that, just as understanding and development can occur, often quite discretely, in a number of intellectual domains (or "intelligences"), then so might creativity be fostered (or not) in separate realms of understanding – hence, the creative footballer, the creative writer, the creative mathematician, the emotionally creative person, and so on (see Gardner, 1994).

In a broadly comparable study with animals, Birch (1945) discovered that four- and five-year-old chimpanzees that had been raised in a laboratory and, consequently, had had no prior experience of playing with sticks, were unable to use a hoe to rake a banana from outside their cage to within their reach. The chimpanzees were then allowed to play with sticks for three days and were subsequently re-tested. Even though they never used the sticks in the specific manner required for the task solution during their play, they were all able to solve the problem with little difficulty during the re-test. Birch concluded that: “play provided the chimpanzees with the opportunity to develop a *generalised* schema of action with the object . . . which was then mobilised in the *specific* way required for the task” [my emphases] (cited in Vandenberg, 1980, p. 51). Whilst one would necessarily wish to be cautious in drawing associations between the behaviour of young children and that of chimpanzees, all three of these empirical studies (i.e. those by Sylva, Bruner and Genova; Smith and Dutton; and Birch) would appear to support Bruner, Jolly and Sylva’s claim that play has the effect not of providing practice in particular behaviours of problem-solution but, rather, of “making possible the playful practice of sub-routines of behaviour later to be combined in more useful problem-solving” (1976, p. 15).

Clark, Griffing and Johnson (1989) are able to cite a whole range of empirical studies (Lieberman, 1965, 1977; Dansky, 1980; Dansky and Silverman, 1973, 1975; Li, 1978; Pellegrini, 1981, 1982, 1984; Pellegrini and Greene, 1980; Pepler and Ross, 1981) supporting the notion that “the freedom and fluidity of symbolic play in the activity domain [is] related to, and perhaps facilitative of, ideational or associative fluency [arguably, another aspect of “creativity”] in the cognitive domain” (p. 77). Garvey similarly observes how “. . . engaging in make-believe appears to contribute to the flexibility with which a child can approach situations and tasks” (1990, p. 97). The aforementioned studies include Lieberman’s (1965) who was probably the earliest empiricist to relate “playfulness” to measures of creativity, and also the work of Dansky and Silverman (1973, 1975) who not only saw play as positively exercising children’s creative thinking

(1976, pp. 652-3) but also, critically, as enabling individuals “to facilitate imaginative adaptations to future situations” (cited in Clark, Griffing and Johnson, p. 79). In other words, playful activity did not only generate creative thinking during the immediate, pretend context, but also nurtured and promoted creative cognition successfully in other contexts and over time. Similarly, Clark, Griffing and Johnson’s own longitudinal study (1988) found early-years symbolic play “to be related to ideational fluency at preschool and to measures of flexibility, originality and intelligence, administered three years later” (p. 88). These findings lend weight to the studies of Hutt and Bhavnani (1976) and Russ (2003) which, likewise, support the view of the durability of the relationship between play and creativity.

What is rather more problematic to determine, however, is the notion of causality between pretend play and creativity. Mellou (1993) appears to find little difficulty in glibly stating, “There is a positive correlation between dramatic play and creativity, or better [?], the former *causes* the latter” (p. ii, my emphasis). Dansky (1979) also concluded that sociodramatic play helped children develop a more generalised “as if” attitude which enhanced subsequent performance in creativity tests (cited in Vandenberg, 1980, p. 64). Garvey, however, advises caution in making claims for causality, warning that whilst it is not correct to say that play caused greater creativity, “It is true that those children who displayed non-literal or imaginative behaviour prior to the task were the best problem solvers” (1990, p. 51). There might be, then, an underlying cause of both creativity and the facility to play. It is also worth pointing out that, whilst play cannot necessarily be claimed to spawn greater divergence of thinking, it can be regarded as assisting flexibility and novel solutions because of its intrinsically stress-free nature (Broadhead, 2004, p. 13). As already noted, play necessarily possesses no utilitarian goals or objectives – it is pursued essentially for pleasure (Garvey, 1990, pp. 4-5). Paradoxically, therefore, the players in Sylva’s (1977) aforementioned study involving sticks and clamps, whilst having no explicit goals to achieve, were able to remain more (not less)

goal-directed as they were able to “proceed without frustration or fear of failure” (p. 71). They were more able to achieve their objectives, in other words, because the achievement of these objectives was not the prime motivation for their continued activity – having fun was. Bruner (1991) goes so far as to argue that the relatively long period of childhood in humans (in comparison with other species) evolved precisely to afford maximum opportunity for stress-free exploration in play. If the human young are not having to worry about their own safety and protection, then they are at liberty to indulge in the playful and pleasurable seeking of novelty and the exploration of the unknown. The facility safely to take risks within the protective parameters of play “leads to the kind of creative flexibility the best of human thinking is capable of” (Guha, 1988, p. 68).

Conversely, of course, play cannot occur when the child is feeling stressed or pressurised. Play and coercion are incompatible bedfellows as Pip in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* discovers when he first visits Miss Havisham:

“I sometimes have sick fancies,” she went on, “and I have a sick fancy that I want to see some play. There, there!” with an impatient movement of the fingers of her right hand, “play, play, play!”

For a moment, with the fear of my sister’s working me before my eyes, I had a desperate idea of starting round the room in the assumed character of Mr. Pumblechook’s chaise-cart. But I felt myself so unequal to the performance that I gave it up and stood looking at Miss Havisham in what I suppose she took for a dogged manner, inasmuch as she said, when we had taken a good look at each other:

“Are you sullen and obstinate?”

“No, ma’am, I am very sorry for you, and very sorry I can’t play just now. If you complain of me I shall get into trouble with my sister, so I would do it if I could; but it’s so new here, and so strange, and so fine – and melancholy.”

Even though Pip has significant motivation to play (to avoid the wrath of both Miss Havisham and his sister), he is unable to do so because of the stress he is experiencing and the complete absence of enjoyment: “Play to order is no longer play” (Huizinga, 1977, p. 675). It is not difficult to think of many comparable work-based scenarios where one is unable, under pressure, to produce a ready solution to a pressing problem. A cup of coffee, a laugh with colleagues and a fifteen-minute break later, however, the solution “presents itself” with astonishing facility. Similarly, Vandenberg (1980, p. 66) cites the broadly comparable “Eureka!” phenomenon of Archimedes where the desired “answer” to his problem was discovered in the context of an activity that was not directed towards the task and was, consequently, stress-free. Once again, then, in connection with my third research question, a number of developmental areas under scrutiny can be seen to cohere and to overlap: not only are play and creativity inter-linked but also conjoined are affective aspects of development (Russ, 2003), including pleasure – subjects of sections 4 and 5 of this chapter.

In reviewing the literature on play and creativity, then, one can conclude that, at the very least, there is a positive connection between the two and that both can be influenced by the environment (context) in which they occur (Vandenberg, 1980, p. 62). Moreover, the ability to play will also manifest itself as the ability to think imaginatively and creatively over different contexts and over time (Moyles, 1989, p. 73). Finally, this beneficial correlation between play and creativity can be viewed as just one aspect of cognitive development which may be positively fostered through sociodramatic play as, indeed, may the ability to think abstractedly and conceptually.

## **2. Language Development**

In attempting to understand the manner in which a child develops the ability to use language (both “externally” and “internally”), a social constructivist



approach again appears the most useful (e.g. Britton, 1989; Wood, 1998). According to this paradigm, as with other aspects of development, language can be regarded as initially occurring “out there”, within the social domain, only later to be internalised and to become “a vital means by which we represent our own thought to ourselves” (Mercer, 1995, p. 4). Vygotsky’s notion of “egocentric speech” (i.e. children “talking to themselves”) represents the transitional stage from external to internal linguistic facility (Open University, 1994a, p. 51). Speech begins as a shared, social activity on the part of the child and develops into a principal means whereby thoughts are regulated and behaviours are refined: “This is the prime example of Vygotsky’s theory of internalisation to achieve consciousness” (Britton, 1989, p. 212). Ultimately, of course, these two functions of language – the communicative and the cognitive – are not really separate at all (Mercer, 1994, p. 4). Moreover, as discussed above, if child development is to be characterised, at least in part, as the progression towards higher, more abstract, disembedded ways of thinking, then linguistic advancement is, necessarily, of fundamental importance to this. For language is central not only to thinking, but also to “thinking about thinking,” or metacognition (Bruner, 1985). In writing this paragraph, for instance, I am striving to encapsulate what I wish to say in written words – language, that is, is not merely the transference of my thoughts into words but, rather, the realisation of my thinking. My thoughts only become fully-fledged when they are “concretised” into language. As Vygotsky would have it, “Language structures and directs thinking and concept formation” (Open University, 1994a, p. 51). Mastery of language, in other words, is essential if one is to utilise abstract, hypothetical thinking freed from its embeddedness in particular contexts and particular events (Open University, 1994b, p. 89; Wells, cited in Moyles, 1989, p. 62).

## **2a. Sociodramatic Play and Language Development**

As has already been noted, in pretend play we encounter actions, objects, people and situations which “represent” *other* actions, objects, people and situations. This phenomenon, we have observed, bears a remarkable

resemblance to the phenomenon of language where words are used to represent all manner of things (Schaffer, 1996, p. 120). The ability, in play, to pretend that a doll is a baby may be linked with the ability, in language use, to “pretend” that the word “baby” refers to a baby (Smith, 1988, p. 187). It can persuasively be argued, then, that “the evolution of play may have been an important step in the evolution of communication” (Bateson, 1976, p. 121). Hulme and Lunzer conclude that “the interaction of play and language promotes the elaboration of the former and the development towards independence in the latter” (cited by Rosenblatt, 1977, p. 42). Indeed, perhaps language and representational play should not be regarded as separate and parallel activities, but rather as complementary functions (Bretherton, 1984, p. xii).

It may come as no surprise, then, given the interdependence of play and language development, that of the twenty children seen by Rosenblatt, those whose play matured more rapidly also learned language earlier (1977, p. 39). Moreover, Dunn and Wooding, in their study of children aged between 18 and 24 months, found that joint representational activity between mothers and their children helped provide optimum conditions for language use and development – both in terms of the quality of the verbal interchange and the duration of the child’s attention span. Indeed, the fictional world of sociodramatic play has been found to provide optimal conditions for language use amongst children older than those studied by Dunn and Wooding. Goncu and Kessel (1984) commented on the sheer quantity of speech in the dyadic play of three and four year olds as well as its increasing coherence with age. They noted how linguistic interaction developed “not only regarding their interpretation of play reality but also regarding how that is represented and expressed” (1984, p. 19).

Pellegrini (1985) examined some of the characteristics of literate, quite sophisticated language use in the speech of four- and five-year-old children engaged in dyadic play. In complex social pretend play (play in which several fantasy schemes were integrated into complex episodes), children

tended to use more literate features in their conversation than when they were occupied in either construction play or in other types of social interaction. For example, greater sophistication in the use of such linguistic elements as pronouns, noun phrases, conjunctions and verbs was found during periods of complex sociodramatic play than during other comparable episodes (cited in Garvey, 1990, pp. 165-6).

Children's ability to explore and experiment with language use might also be seen to connect with their developing sense of humour and fun (see the section below on Sociodramatic Play and Humour/Pleasure). As Weir notes: "Just as the pleasure in a joke can be derived from play with words, so does the child enjoy play with words" (1976, p. 610). It is perhaps no coincidence that, as preschool children become more adept at experimenting with componential features of language, they also become more able to utilise linguistic play for comic effect. Chukovsky (1963), for instance, reports examples of rhyming poems created by 3- and 4-year-old children:

I'm a whale  
This is my tail  
I'm a flamingo. Look at my wingo

And by about 4 years of age conceptual incongruity appears humorous:

C., aged 5, said to her mother, "I can play a piano by ear".  
Then she banged her ear on the piano keyboard and laughed.  
(cited in Smith *et al*, 1998, p. 185)

Yet again, then, various features of development – in this case, the linguistic and the humorous – are seen as operating in playful complementarity.

Indeed, Bruner (and others) see play as having some "deep connection" with linguistic development *per se* (Bruner, Jolly and Sylva, 1976, p. 19). The structures, conventions and rules of play are seen as part of the child's first

mastery of language – another activity which is governed by structures, conventions and rules. The format of play is almost “language-like” both in its assignment of turn-taking roles and in its sequencing and signalling of “meanings” (Bruner, 1983, p. 46-7) and the rule structure of play sensitises the child to the rule structure of language (Bruner, Jolly and Sylva, 1976, p. 19). Of course, these assertions are almost impossible to prove but, nevertheless, they remain appealing and persuasive (Schaffer, 1996, pp.114-5).

Paradoxically, many instances of play, far from exhibiting the rule-governed nature of language use, actually depict children wilfully decimating language, reconstituting it, repeating sounds, “talking funny” and, generally speaking, *playing* with language (Garvey, 1990, pp. 70-1; Smith *et al*, 1998, p. 186). At times such as these, the meaning of the words may well be “secondary or non-existent, and it is only the sound and rhythm that are enjoyed” (Garvey, 1990, pp. 62-3). Surely there are parallels here with my previous comments about play and divergent thinking: play affords novel situations for the child creatively and pleasurably to explore language and its constituent features, free from the pressures and constraints of more formal language activity encountered during curricular provision such as the “Literacy Hour”. Moreover, in play the child can be found taking apart and putting together componential aspects and sequences of language that s/he cannot consciously isolate or decompose until several years later (Garvey, 1990, pp. 65-6). Cazden (1976) hypothesises that experimentation with the “forms” of language during play contributes more significantly to the achievement of literacy (and, ultimately, to metalinguistic capability) than does language-use in non-play contexts. This is because, during play, language *per se* can become the object of a child’s attention rather than being simply the means to achieving communicative ends (p. 605). Of course, it would not be possible to say whether such playing with language is essential to normal language development, but it would appear to be more than likely (Garvey, 1990, p. 66).

Furthermore, in sociodramatic play, children can be seen utilising a far greater linguistic range than that which they normally use. They adopt with remarkable accuracy the intonation, vocabulary and phraseology of the characters they are impersonating: “In role they . . . can assume adult voices, and show how much they have learned about different registers from listening and from reading” (Barrs, 1994, p. 256). Nelson and Seidman (1984) detail a further benefit of social pretend play to linguistic development. They argue that, in their play, children explore and expand mutually understood “narratives” (or what they term “scripts” – see above for the importance of narrative in human understanding). These scripts structure the “extended dialogic exchanges of fantasy play” (p. 67) and, therefore, consistently provide the framework for more sustained and more sophisticated language use than is normally present in “real-life” dialogue (p. 68). Once again, therefore, sociodramatic play is seen as being important not only to the development of language *per se* (and, thereby, to the ability to engage in abstract thought), but also as being significant in nurturing and improving children’s abilities to use language as a cultural and communicative tool.

### **3. Perspective Taking/Social Cognition**

As will have been noted from much of the above discussion, according to a sociocultural perspective not only are aspects of development such as the cognitive, the social, the affective and the linguistic complementary, overlapping and transactional but they are also, in the final reckoning, inseparable (Open University, 1998; Schaffer, 1996, p. 1-2). Even when language becomes internalised and constitutes the process of thinking, for example, it still remains inherently social – the individual has assimilated “the attitudes and roles of others implicated in a common social activity” (Mead, 1934, p. xvi). The individual, that is, has become encultured (Trevvarthen, 1998, p. 87). Moreover, social activities (such as collaborative play) encompass motivational and affective factors which are also “fundamentally cognitive in nature” (Brownell and Carriger, 1998, p. 198). Barnes (1989) similarly underlines the importance of this interplay between

the affective, motivational and cognitive realms of operation during social endeavour: “Feeling and values play an essential role in action-oriented uses of intelligence, since in the real world intellectual performance involves satisfying one’s own motives” (1989, p. 78). And of course it is our ability intellectually to infer what others are thinking and feeling in any social exchange which lies at the heart of communication, co-operation and competition. Indeed, it is probably the *inability* of autistic people to “mind-read” the thoughts and emotional states of others which results in their having such great difficulty in understanding social environments (Bailey, 2002, p. 164). Any adequate definition of “social cognition”, therefore, must acknowledge the fact that it is cognitive functions which guide behaviour in the social world and that any social action must inevitably be “emotionally toned” (Schaffer, 1996, p. 2). If these various areas of development are, then, ultimately inseparable, how might we identify advancement in social cognition – that is, the gaining of interpersonal understandings about other people’s thoughts, feelings and perspectives – in the multimodal realm of sociodramatic play? Needless to say, this dichotomy – in identifying the particular developmental benefits of sociodramatic play whilst simultaneously acknowledging the transactional interconnections across areas of development – is one which has to be continuously borne in mind when addressing my first and third research questions:

1. What types of development are nurtured through children’s sociodramatic play?
3. How might these various types of development interrelate during sociodramatic play?

### **3a. Sociodramatic Play and Perspective Taking/Social Cognition**

As already stated, sociodramatic play utilises as its raw material scripts or narratives drawn (or embellished) from family life, storybooks, television, and so on (Bretherton 1984, p. 8). Its constituent features, in other words, are essentially those of the social world (Garvey, 1990, p. 79). Play,

therefore, can serve as a useful vehicle whereby children learn something about the rules and conventions of society and about their own place within it (Bruner, 1991, p. 264; Garvey, 1990, p. 88). Of perhaps more importance to the child's developing social understanding, though, is the fact that, as previously mentioned, in symbolic play children do not merely "re-present" learned narratives but, rather, transform "their affective-cognitive map of the social world" (Bretherton, 1984, pp. 7-8). As discussed earlier, children can produce through pretend play a variety of "as-if" and "what-if" alternatives to everyday reality (Bailey, 2002, p. 168; Bretherton, 1984). They not only re-create aspects of the real world, but also create other fictive worlds. Thus, during play children are able to expand their existing knowledge and social understanding by applying it to new contexts and environments (Goncu, 1998, p. 118).

The development of social cognition during pretend play, however, does not merely concern children's understanding and exploration of society's norms, conventions and expectations. Critically, it also involves children's increasing ability to grasp other people's cognitive and affective states (Dockett, 1998, p. 108; Schaffer, 1996, pp. 183-4). During role play, one's "world" can be explored from a completely different vantage point (Bretherton, 1984, p. 10): one can, for example, experience something about what it is like to be a teacher in a school situation, even when one is still only five years old. As we shall analyse shortly, the capacity for role play – the impersonating of someone who is not oneself and the adopting of intentions and feelings that are different from one's own – is surely symptomatic of a growing understanding of others (Dunn, 1998, p. 108). First, though, let it be noted how, during shared pretend play, a degree of collaboration and co-operation, and a measure of shared understanding (intersubjectivity) is called upon that far outstrips what might have been expected from observing the same children in non-fictive situations. This co-operation depends on "a sensitivity to the mood of the other . . . on a willingness to obey directions within the play context, to negotiate, concede to, and co-ordinate with another" (Dunn, 1988, p. 109). Goncu and Kessel,

in their study of dyadic imaginative play, noted, “A great deal of consensus between the partners on their representation of reality,” (1984, p. 10). The topic of adherence to rules – a subject we will be repeatedly returning to – may be pertinent here. For during successful sociodramatic play, children are not only reproducing societal rules and norms (as referred to above), they are also creating, sharing and adhering to the internal rules of the play itself: you can only continue to be mother if I continue to treat you as mother; the table can only continue to be a secret hideaway if we both continue to agree that is what it is. As Guha comments, “The creation and sharing of rules may be seen as the most important learning function of sociodramatic play” (1988, p. 71). More precisely, complicit agreement has to continue on at least three different planes if sociodramatic play is to be successful: (i) there has to be agreement on the pretend *focus* of the activity; (ii) there has to be co-operative communication (verbal and otherwise) *within* the play-frame; and (iii) there has to be productive collaboration *outside* of the play-frame, on the metacommunicative level (Goncu, 1998). Indeed, there is strong evidence to suggest that positive collaboration between peers and the successful attainment of shared understandings is far more likely to occur within episodes of joint pretend play than in other “real-life” situations (Dunn, 1988). Failure to appreciate and accommodate the perspectives of others not only leads to a breakdown of the shared pretence, but also the repeated inability of a child to “read” the verbal and non-verbal messages communicated within and without the play-frame is frequently indicative of a child who is a “loner” or who is socially rejected (Kantor, Elgas and Fernie, 1998, p. 136). Perhaps Loizos is not guilty of hyperbole, then, when stating: “Far from being a “spare-time”, superfluous activity . . . it may be that play at certain crucial early stages is necessary for the occurrence and success of all later social activity” (cited by Moyles, 1989, p. xii).

Having acknowledged pretend play’s ability to facilitate and perhaps foster mutual collaboration and co-operation, let us return to the issue, mentioned earlier, of how sociodramatic play is intrinsically related to the child’s



perspective-taking ability – that is, the ability to be aware of viewpoints other than one’s own. Mead (1934, p. 366) has argued that appreciating someone else’s point of view springs from the same capacity as taking on a fictitious role – and, through this interpersonal intelligence, notions of sympathy and empathy are born (see also Tan-Niam, 1994, pp. 6-7). The adoption of a role other than oneself, and the co-ordinating of this (both on the communicative and metacommunicative levels) with other people who are similarly in role, involves successful perspective-taking ability on three levels: (i) the perceptual (understanding what other people, and their fictitious characters, are *seeing*); (ii) the cognitive (understanding what other people, and their fictitious characters, are *thinking*); and (iii) the affective (understanding what other people, and their fictitious characters, are *feeling*) (Tan-Niam, 1994, pp. 6-7). Indeed, a number of researchers have come to regard children’s first forays into the world of pretend play as also signalling their first attempts at recognising the mental states of other people (e.g. Leslie, cited in Bailey, 2002, p. 169) – taking on a role, that is, may well be indicative of (and possibly even facilitative of) the ability empathetically to “read” someone else’s mind (Bailey, 2002). Yet again, a fundamentally social-constructivist approach to development may be useful in helping to understand what is going on here. Social pretend play allows children to enact what it is like to see the world from a perspective different from their own. The social learning that is occurring – just as we noted with Vygotsky’s observations concerning language acquisition progressing from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal – is initially “out there”, it is essentially “*intermental*”. Later, of course, as understandings about other people’s cognitive and affective states are internalised, social cognition becomes “*intramental*” (Bailey, 2002, p. 170). In her empirical study, even though she was not seeking to identify causal links, Tan-Niam (1998) concluded that children who possessed a “Theory of Mind” (i.e. the ability to adopt perspectives other than their own) were more likely to engage in prolonged, successful shared pretend play than those who did not. Indeed: “The presence or absence of pretend play has become a standard developmental marker for normal or impaired development in mind-reading

[i.e. understanding the intentionality of others] during infancy” (Baron-Cohen, cited in Bailey, 2002, p. 169). Moreover, Hickling, Wellman and Gottfried (1997) discovered that children of a certain age were actually better at understanding the mental attitudes of others during pretence situations than they were during their “real-life” counterparts. In her 1994 study, Tan-Niam even concluded that “the better a child is at taking on different roles in fantasy play, the better he/she will be at perspective-taking” (p. 7). This, however, seems dangerously close to overstatement, for surely there are more abilities called upon in successful role-adoption (such as issues connected with self-confidence, co-operation skills, popularity, linguistic abilities, etc.) than solely the capacity for perspective-taking (Bailey, 2002, p. 170).

Nevertheless, it would appear irrefutable that shared pretend play and the development of perspective taking/social cognition are inextricably interconnected – whether that be in terms of assimilating, mastering and exploring society’s conventions and rules, or in collaboratively achieving mutual understandings, or in the ability to perceive the world from the viewpoint of others (Bailey, 2002, pp. 170-1). Social play and social understanding would seem to operate hand-in-glove.

#### **4. Identity Construction/Emotional and Moral Development**

It may seem curious, in a work which has been at pains to stress the interconnectedness of the various developmental areas under scrutiny yet which has also insisted on rather arbitrarily dividing the examination into five domains, that this very same work should also “lump together” in one section three apparently self-standing areas of development – namely, the construction of the self, emotional development, and moral development. Nevertheless, as will be seen, numerous writers (e.g. Berg, 1999; Dunn, 1988) have found it necessary to discuss development across these three domains concurrently. It is hoped that the remainder of this section will self-evidently demonstrate why it would be unhelpful and, possibly, misleading to discuss any of these three areas in isolation. Furthermore, the literature on

the construction of the self and emotional and moral development is very wide and so, needless to say, the following review limits itself to those aspects which relate most closely to sociodramatic play.

To refer back to the *Introduction* of this work, it would seem that current educational practice in the western world – perhaps especially in England – tends to perceive and present the learning process as being fundamentally cognitive in nature (David, 1998). Children are expected to acquire knowledge, understanding and skills in a context where relatively little acknowledgement is afforded to the affective and social dimensions of the learning process. This section – like the previous one – will endeavour to redress somewhat that imbalance. While the first two sections of this chapter have, indeed, made a case for the possible cognitive benefits of social pretend play, and the third argued primarily for its social import, this section will seek to highlight the potential advantages of sociodramatic play for emotional, intrapersonal development. Indeed, writers such as Merttens (2002) find no problem in glibly asserting play’s “crucial importance for children’s emotional and social development” (p. 7). Yet the implicit assumption appears to be that these areas of development – and, by association, play itself – are rather less consequential than advancement along an “ultimately more important progression – a pedagogical hierarchy” (Merttens, 2002, p. 7). Merttens appears to limit the cognitive benefits of play to the opportunities it affords for curricular reinforcement, “using it as a vehicle for invaluable counting, writing, listening, speaking and reading opportunities,” (p. 7). However, what must be emphasised in this section is the importance of the affective sphere for all domains of learning. After all, as already argued, children “often display their most ‘advanced’ levels of reasoning in situations that matter to them and that arouse their attention and emotions” (Wood, 1998, p. 162). Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligence* (1996) draws upon a wide range of research to underline how children’s cognitive progress will be constantly retarded unless they can be helped to understand their own feelings and overcome excesses of potentially negative emotions such as anger. Other research focuses upon self-esteem – the opinions one

has about oneself – and demonstrates how high self-esteem “is a prerequisite for becoming a fluent reader” (Roberts, 1995; Raban, 1995; cited in David, 1998, p. 63). Sylva (1997) delineates the need for a less formal early-years curriculum with greater emphasis on the emotional and social aspects of learning, arguing that failure to provide such a curriculum “will lead to poorer performance, disincentives to learn and low self-esteem” (cited in David, 1998, p. 63). So, if feelings do occupy a central place within children’s learning in spite of the low political profile afforded to them within, in particular, English educational spheres, how do they relate to both the child’s developing sense of self as well as an increasing awareness of moral issues – that is, the three separate, but related, focuses of this present section?

### **i. Identity Construction**

Let us first begin by investigating how a child constructs a sense of identity, an awareness of the self as a distinct entity which, while being far from immutable, is also separate from, and different to, the others that surround it. In order to progress this investigation, we first need to explore the highly plausible notion that a sense of self is intrinsically linked both to a sense of others as well as to one’s emotional experiences (Dunn, 1988, p. 78). Freud saw knowledge of oneself as key to healthy emotional well-being (cited in Gardner, 1993, pp. 238-9) and more recent analysts have underlined the pivotal importance of self-awareness: “It enables the individual to adopt a particular stance from which to view the world – a source of reference which mediates social experience and which organises behaviour towards others” (Schaffer, 1996, p. 154). William James would have concurred with this view (Gardner, 1993, pp. 238-9) and went on to make a distinction which has proved crucial in thinking about the self (1892, cited in Schaffer, 1996, p. 155). James distinguished between what he termed the “I” and the “me”. The “I” may be defined as the subjective self – the active agent which, to an extent at least, is continuous over time and which observes and interprets experience. The “I” may be thought of as giving each one of us our unique, separate identity (Schaffer, 1996, p. 155). The “me”, on the

other hand, is the self-as-object – that which we perceive when we observe and analyse ourselves. It is the product of our attempts at self-awareness and includes all those aspects which we call into play when attempting to define ourselves – gender, age, race, physical characteristics, qualities of temperament, and so on (Schaffer, 1996, p. 155). Most critically of all, James regarded this objective sense of self, this awareness of “me”, as arising from an awareness of *others* (Gardner, 1993, pp. 238-9). Significantly, this avenue of thought was taken up and progressed by the likes of George Herbert Mead (1934) who further investigated the process whereby *interpersonal* cognition (knowledge of others) developed into *intrapersonal* understanding (knowledge of oneself). It hardly needs stating that the direction of this progression – from the social to the individual – adheres to notions of social constructivism and so many features of development discussed thus far.

An awareness of the self emerges during the second year of childhood with infants beginning: (1) to recognise themselves visually; (2) to define themselves in terms of attributes such as age, sex, size; (3) to understand terms referring to the self such as “I” and “me”; and (4) to say their own names (Schaffer, 1996, pp. 156-7). George Herbert Mead’s argument that this sense of self arises as a direct result of interaction with other people, whilst being difficult to prove (Schaffer, 1996, p. 155), remains highly persuasive: “The self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience” (1934, p. 140). And it follows from this, of course, that if our sense of self is socially structured, then it will also necessarily be culturally determined (Dunn, 1988, p. 79). We are, in other words, products of – as well as contributors to – the culture in which we find ourselves (Thyssen, 2003).

In the preceding section on Social Cognition, we noted children’s ability to “mind-read” the cognitive and affective states of other people. Dunn (1988, p. 79) argues that this ability to adopt the perspectives of others coheres with Mead’s theories about the construction of the self. (Once again, notice,

there is significant overlap and interchange between the various areas of development being scrutinised in this work.) For to have a sense of self – to observe objectively the “me” which is at the core of our being – is analogous to the “ability to think about oneself from the standpoint of another” (Dunn, 1988, p. 79). The foundations of self-awareness lie in sensitivity to others and sensitivity to how others respond to and perceive oneself. This may well be why some autistic children, for instance, display such an impaired sense of self that they have difficulties in correctly using the terms “I” and “me”: “Whatever the problem that devastates the autistic child, it clearly involves difficulties in knowing others and in using that knowledge to know oneself,” (Gardner, 1993, p. 264). For a sense of self to arise, then, it would seem imperative to have a sense of others, and a sense of others’ perception of oneself (Lefrancois, 1994, p. 244; Open University, 1999, p. 45) – and we have, of course, noted the potential value of sociodramatic play to perspective taking in the previous section. The self-awareness that begins to develop from the second year of life, in other words, is not solely a result of cognitive change, it is also a product of the culture, the social environment, in which it is ensconced and which contributes to its formation (Dunn, 1988, p. 79).

Gardner progresses this line of reasoning and goes on to posit the theory that, if the self is the product of the many and multifarious connections it makes with the culture in which it is placed, then the “self” is perhaps more helpfully thought of as a variety of “selves”, an “amalgam” (1993, p. 243). This line of thought is taken up by Schaffer (1996). In an archetypal post-modernist manner, he argues that “the self is by no means a simple, unitary concept but rather a complex system of different constructs” (1996, p. 155). The self is a collection of selves. Moreover, this multi-faceted entity is in a constant state of flux: “The self-concept is far from static. It changes as a result of the continuous process of self-observation that we all indulge in (the ‘I’ watching the ‘me’)” (Schaffer, 1996, p. 159). Furthermore, the estimation we have of our selves will also affect our self-concept, especially in the light of experiencing various successes or failures and the positive or

negative emotions associated therewith (Schaffer, 1996, p. 159). The self, then, would appear to be best thought of as a culturally-determined constellation of selves which is forever capable of alteration and development. (Of course, this notion of a “cast-of-thousands” embedded within the single self may well be thought of as ideal “casting material” for the many and diverse roles which sociodramatic play demands.) Moreover, the intellectual awareness of the self and the emotions which continuously help to refine and re-define it would also appear to be inseparable.

## **ii. Emotional Development**

If a sense of self is commensurate with a sense of others and derives from a comparable ability, what is it that drives children to understand the thoughts and feelings, the intentions and motivations, of those people with whom they come into contact? Dunn (1988) argues that it is precisely the “emotional power” which underpins interpersonal relationships which encourages children to “read and understand their mothers’ moods or their siblings’ intentions” (p. 73). In a line of argument completely at odds with Bertolt Brecht’s (1964) views on the deleterious effect of the emotions on cognitive reasoning – in brief, he argues that affective, empathetic engagement with the subject matter clouds one’s ability to think objectively and rationally – Dunn contends that emotional involvement in their encounters with other people was exactly what led the children to be extra vigilant to the behaviours of others and to remember, reflect upon and learn from these exchanges (1988, pp. 80-1). Given this motivational drive for cognitive advancement, then, it is hardly surprising that Dunn found, in an apparently paradoxical manner, that it was precisely those encounters with mothers and siblings where the children expressed distress or anger, which “they were later most likely to reason rather than simply protest [about]” (1988, p. 80-1). Motivational and emotional processes, that is, were intrinsically linked with cognitive achievement (Dunn, 1988, p. 82). Wordsworth’s (1802) view of poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquillity” (1936, p. 737) might be one way of conceptualising how growth in cognition is rooted in matters of affective import.

However, it is not only the importance of the emotions to cognitive growth which must be emphasised in this section. Also of note is the pivotal role of the affective domain in the understanding and construction of the self (the subject of our last sub-section) – most notably with regard to both self-control and self-esteem. I shall deal with the topic of self-control in our next sub-section – on moral development. Let us now turn our attention to emotional development and self-esteem.

Lewis (1992, cited in Schaffer, 1996, pp. 168-9) has argued that “primary” emotions such as fear and anger do not rely upon the capacity for objective self-awareness, the appearance of the “me”. They are, therefore, present in early infancy. “Secondary” emotions, however, such as pride, shame, guilt and embarrassment all require a consciousness of the self. They are, after all, emotions which help us to evaluate the self; they are self-referring. The estimation of the self, then, the opinion one has about oneself, is “inevitably affect-laden” (Schaffer, 1996, p. 168). Thus, whilst a certain level of cognitive advancement is an essential prerequisite for evaluating the self, the extent to which this is an emotional operation also needs to be acknowledged. The concept of self-esteem, in other words, possesses both cognitive and emotional features (Schaffer, 1996, p. 169). It is vital to remember this when we think back to the research cited earlier in this section concerning the importance of self-esteem for academic attainment – cognitive advancement is not a purely cognitive process, it is also dependent upon affective features such as the feelings one has about oneself. Moreover, the intellectual and emotional assessment of the self is not a purely personal process – self-esteem is directly and greatly influenced by the social domain, the opinions which others hold and express about oneself: “. . . at no time can the self function as a wholly closed system; how others respond to the individual will affect self-evaluation and esteem throughout life” (Schaffer, 1996, p. 170).



To conclude this sub-section, let it be restated that emotional development can be regarded as critical to growth in cognition. Our intellect is most fully stimulated when our feelings are also aroused. Furthermore, our sense of self will invariably be emotionally “toned” – what we feel about ourselves, and what we believe others feel too, will help forge our estimation of ourselves. In true cyclical fashion, self-esteem/self-concept will, in turn, affect future cognitive achievement which will further affect how we feel about ourselves. And so this transactional cycle continues. Is it any wonder that Goleman places such emphasis on the affective dimension in children’s learning: “Our passions, when well exercised, have wisdom; they guide our thinking, our values, our survival” (1996, pp. xiii-xiv). And it is the manner in which “our passions” guide “our values” which is central to the next sub-section.

### **iii. Moral Development**

Schaffer (1996) defines what he means by an individual who has been successfully socialised and who consequently will act in a socially responsible manner as someone who has acquired a sense of morality: “That is, he or she will behave in ways that uphold the social order and will do so through inner conviction and not because of a fear of punishment” (1996, p. 290). Fiske (2002), however, wonders what motivates people to forgo matters of short-term self-interest and instead to behave in ways which are likely to develop and sustain social relationships. Why do we so often act in modes which are morally informed and influenced, and which are motivated by selfless (rather than selfish) concerns? After all, he notes that the temptation to behave in a self-centred, anti-social manner is often extremely difficult to resist – we need only think of the urge to keep the £10 note which someone has unwittingly dropped to appreciate the point. Nevertheless, Fiske also recognises that again and again people behave in a socially responsible, culturally constructive manner even though “the payoffs for committed co-operation are indefinite: difficult to discern, impossible to assess accurately, uncertain and distant” (2002, p. 169). Why is this? Fiske concludes that it is because we are motivated by certain

“socio-moral” emotions to exercise self-control, thereby promoting co-operation and enabling us to resist temptation. This would appear to be at odds with “commonsensical” assumptions – such as those of Brecht (1964) referred to earlier – which view rationality as being responsible for cool, detached, objective, socially responsible activity whilst emotion is seen as promoting rash, impulsive, unthinking, potentially disruptive behaviour (Best, 1992). In this scenario, cognition and emotion are seen as being generally antithetical: “Feelings are private and limited. Against that the reason is fairly comprehensive and to be relied on” (Brecht, 1964, p. 15). But Fiske argues that this is to over-generalise. Certainly those “primary” emotions such as anger which we noted earlier may potentially result in socially undesirable outcomes (such as fighting) but there are also “secondary” emotions – those requiring a sense of self – such as love, loneliness, desire for approval, shame and guilt which help engender positive, socially-committed behaviour: “Social and moral emotions motivate people to act to curb their non-social appetites in the interest of the relationships that are so crucial to their survival, reproduction and welfare” (Fiske, 2002, pp. 170-4). Feelings guide individual behaviour to act for the benefit of long-term, social ends, rather than short-term, personal gains. Aspects of self-control, therefore, begin to appear which are not exclusively intellectual – the affective domain, as well as the cognitive, is critical in achieving socially acceptable, morally informed behaviour. In part at least, this is prompted by the basic need to belong to a social grouping (Baumeister and Leary, cited in Fiske, 2002, p. 170). However, the urge to sustain social relationships is also assisted by the concept of self-esteem discussed earlier. The opinions which others hold about oneself help form our self-concept – and our sense of self, and the way it is viewed by others, is a strong motivational factor in promoting socially-responsible behaviour (Fiske, 2002, p. 170). The desire for the approval of others, that is, helps produce other-directed, apparently selfless conduct: “I wish to be liked and accepted by certain others, therefore I shall behave in ways which are acceptable to them even if this means denying myself some immediate pleasures.” Seen in this way, the relationship between the self and the wider

society of which it is a part can once again be regarded as transactional and mutually defining.

Moreover, a sense of self which is – in part at least – socially constructed, will also be far from immutable because of the ever-changing nature of the relationships it encounters. True, “our genetic heritage endows each of us with a series of emotional set-points that determines our temperament” (Goleman, 1996, p. xiii) but our behaviour – and its social acceptability or otherwise – will also be affected by the feelings that we and others have about ourselves. Self-esteem will influence self-conduct. Low self-esteem, consequently, will run the risk of generating socially unacceptable activity, high self-esteem will be more likely to result in morally responsible behaviour. Whichever occurs, it would seem to be the case that our sense of self (and the facets this contains such as self-esteem and self-concept) will be achieved through a combination of cognitive, affective and social influences.

But it is not solely a sensitivity to our own emotional state and sense of self, of course, which will help sustain social relationships. Intrapersonal intelligence alone will not guarantee interpersonal success. In order to attain appropriate interaction with the wider community, one must also possess a sensitivity to the emotional landscapes of others: “The less a person understands the feelings, the responses, and the behaviour of others, the more likely he [*sic*] will interact inappropriately with them” (Gardner, 1993, p. 255). Successful social relationships and socially informed behaviour, then, require affective understanding on both the individual and the wider societal levels. Both interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences are essential for acceptable operation within any given culture (Garner, 1993) and the ways in which development in these two domains might be assisted by sociodramatic play will later be discussed.

Having examined in some detail the emotional dimension of socially appropriate conduct, let us now pay closer attention to how one’s sense of

morality – of right and wrong – is socially determined. Once again, George Herbert Mead is enlightening on this matter and is able to delineate how the social construction of the self also results in the individual assimilating the attitudes and values (the “morality”, if you like) of the culture in which it is located: “What goes to make up the organised self is the organisation of the attitudes which are common to the group. . . . They give him [sic] what we term his principles, the acknowledged attitudes of all members of the community toward what are the values of that community” (1934, p. 162). Dunn (1988) is less generalised, more specific, as to how precisely the individual assimilates the moral standpoints of the wider society. She comments how, although children do not learn by rote all the rules concerning proper and improper conduct (p.67), by the second year of life they are nevertheless receptive to the application of rules concerning appropriate behaviour across a range of different contexts – they are “sensitive to the *generality* of such rules” (1988, pp. 70-1). She attributes this awareness on the toddlers’ parts to the fact that moral rules about (un)acceptable conduct are implicitly and explicitly repeatedly reinforced in what their mothers both say and do (p. 73). In her study, the moral order of the parents’ world was continuously imposed upon the children, cultural norms and values were constantly instated (p. 73). Piaget (1976) similarly noted society’s ability to pass on its moral code. As we shall see in section 5 of this chapter, Piaget emphasised the sense of “order”, the importance of regularity and rule-governed behaviour in early childhood. And Piaget saw this transference of society’s rules, attitudes and values as lying at the heart of children’s moral understanding: “All morality consists in a system of rules,” (1976, p. 413).

Following on from this, one might ask how precisely children internalise the norms and values – the moral code – of the wider society. Surely it is not merely a matter of children blindly accepting what adults and other authority figures didactically preach to them (Smith *et al*, 1998, p. 226). Rather, in a manner which coheres with concepts of social constructivism already discussed, Schaffer (1996) argues that, “Morality is constructed by

the child out of social experience” (p. 291). The child is an active, not a passive, agent in determining his/her own moral standpoint. What is more, the attainment of a socially acceptable sense of morality can be regarded as yoking together the three elements of this current section and providing the prime *raison d’être* for discussing the three in consort. For the attainment of an autonomous sense of morality – what Schaffer terms a “conscience” (1996, p. 291) – is intrinsically linked to both an awareness of the self as well as to one’s emotional development. In brief, the “basic prerequisite” for moral advancement is “the formation of the self” (Schaffer, 1996, pp. 304-5). How else can the “I” morally evaluate the “me”: “*I am good/I am naughty*” (Schaffer, 1996, p. 304)? Furthermore, the socio-moral emotions already discussed will motivate the child to meet certain standards of personal behaviour: “failure to meet them can be very upsetting” (Schaffer, 1996, p. 305). These “secondary”, self-referring emotions thus provide the self-control necessary for morally informed behaviour (Fiske, 2002, p. 169). Identity construction, emotional development and moral development are consequently seen to be inextricably interrelated. Moreover, they might all be positively assisted through engagement in sociodramatic play – the subject of our next sub-section.

#### **4a. Sociodramatic Play and Identity Construction/Emotional and Moral Development**

As previously commented, the advent of symbolisation in children – the ability on which “everything which is distinctively human will develop” (Smith, 1988, p. 199) – can be regarded as manifesting itself in activities as apparently diverse as language use, perspective taking and pretend play. They are all, to some extent and in some sense, “as if” activities requiring some form of imaginative leap: what if I “imagine” this word to stand for this object? Or if I “imagine” myself to be someone else? Or if I “imagine” this stick to be a horse? Viewed in this way, sociodramatic play can be regarded as important for the construction of one’s sense of self in that it facilitates the imaginative exploration of a wide diversity of roles which can thereby act as “markers” by which one’s own identity can be constructed

and positioned. The assumption of other identities, that is, allows the child to experience something of what it feels like to be someone else and, in so doing, to begin to define oneself through correlation with others: “What they are and what they are not, what they wish to be and what they’d rather avoid” (Gardner, 1993, p. 247). Perhaps many of us can concur with novelist Stephen King in acknowledging the strong and lasting influence of assuming identities other than our own: “My earliest memory is of imagining I was someone else – imagining that I was, in fact, the Ringling Brothers Circus Strongboy” (2000, p. 4). In like fashion, my own earliest memory is of imagining myself as a cowboy fighting for survival by shooting in half the arrows raining down upon me. Fein, using George Herbert Mead as her prime influence, thus emphasises how the multiple perspective-taking engaged in during sociodramatic play can help form and crystallise a sense of self as a distinct human being: “Play, by allowing the child to imagine himself as an other, clarifies or consolidates a vision of aspects of the self that are either similar or different from others in the child’s social world” (1991, p. 342). Rubin (1980) also utilises Mead to make the same point: “To establish a separate identity, Mead believed, the child must figuratively get ‘outside’ him- or herself and view the self from some other perspective. Fantasy play was seen as the prime vehicle for this” (p. 74). Similarly, the empirical research of Chafel (2003) argues for the effectiveness of play in helping to facilitate the shift from an egocentric to a sociocentric perspective, thereby assisting the development of self-identity, and “dramatic play” is seen as especially important in this regard (p. 216). Although impossible to prove, then, it may be that the attraction of play for young children, in part at least, stems from their unconscious desire to construct a sense of self, “the need to get a picture of who one is” (Berg, 1999, p. 13) – and, by implication, who one is not. Thus, in fervently portraying a superhero, a knight, a nurse, a mother, a doctor, a Martian, a soldier, a witch or a fairy, the child is demonstrating, “An urge for crystallising an identity in a social world of infinite roles and possible identities. It is an urge for emotional and cognitive growth, probing possibilities and trust” (Berg, 1999, pp. 18-9). For – as we noted earlier – to

be a human being is not simply to attain a single, immutable, discrete identity but, rather, to exist as “a very special unique constellation of different identities and roles” (Berg, 1999, pp. 21-2). In true postmodernist manner, we are a composite of roles and personae – roles and personae which can be inhabited, explored and examined during sociodramatic play.

And just as children can encounter a range of characters and situations in pretend play unavailable to them in real life, so they can experience – albeit vicariously – a plethora of emotional states otherwise beyond their reach (Best, 1992, p. 57). Sociodramatic play affords children opportunities to experience what expressing and dealing with their own and other people’s feelings actually *feels* like (Hadley, 2002, p. 15). To quote Gloucester in *King Lear*, social pretend play allows understandings to be gleaned in the affective, as well as the cognitive, domains – children are able “To see it feelingly” (Act IV, Scene vi, l. 147). Moreover, emotions which would not easily be tolerated in non-fictional situations (such as destruction, aggression, the wish for power, and so on) can be encountered and explored through play and thereby integrated into the child’s affective understanding (Lowenfeld, 1972, p. 54). Indeed, as children’s fictional play becomes increasingly sophisticated they can even examine (normally around the ages of five or six) potentially distressing feelings or ideas within the play-frame (Garvey, 1990, p. 141). It might be pertinent here to cite the Greek myth of *Perseus and the Gorgon*: Perseus is charged with the task of destroying the Gorgon but he knows that to look directly at the creature will result in his being turned to stone. He therefore confronts the Gorgon via its reflection in his polished shield (Blakeney, 1910, p. 394). In much the same way, sociodramatic play might be thought of as providing a mechanism – a kind of safe, protected environment – where children can encounter, and perhaps overcome, some of the fears and feelings that beset them (Kitson, 1997). Clark and Goode (1999) make a comparable point: “The emotions drawn upon in the metaphorical present of the drama activity . . . allow the sublime subtlety of at one and the same time a distancing of the emotion into safety, and a speedy journey to the understanding at its heart” (1999, p. 13). The

fictive distance provided by the play-frame (rather like Perseus' shield) ensures that the potentially distressing subject matter is handled at one remove and allows the child to confront the mirror images of certain features of life which might be too painful, too "raw", if tackled head-on. Once again, novelist Stephen King would appear to be in agreement: "... the purpose of the imagination, I believe, is to offer us solace and shelter from situations and life-passages which would otherwise prove unendurable" (1993, p. 7). The understanding of problematical situations developed during play and the concomitant mastery of the emotions connected with them can, in other words, possess therapeutic benefits: "By representing a traumatic experience or situation symbolically and by returning to it and perhaps reversing its outcome in play, the child becomes better able to deal with the problem in real life" (Garvey, 1990, p. 55). The observations of D. W. Winnicott (1971) are pertinent here – he regarded free play as absolutely necessary for normal and stable emotional development. Likewise, Freud and, later, Erikson (cited in Smith, 1988, p. 198) saw play as a means of working through traumatic events and of gaining sovereignty over anxieties and difficulties: "Play takes place on the border of dangerous alternatives and is always beset both with burdening conflicts and with liberating choices" (Erikson, 1976, p. 698).

It is only a small step from here to realise how the exploration and examination of a wide spectrum of emotional states and ethical dilemmas in sociodramatic play, and their respective desirability and justifiability, will in turn help inform the child's notions of good and evil, right and wrong, and will help constitute the child's moral framework. Less obviously perhaps, the individual's emotional and moral commitment to the greater good of the wider community discussed earlier might also be nurtured by the co-operative social activity required to facilitate sociodramatic play. Vygotsky (1978) argues that cooperation is the basis for morally-informed action and states that children first learn to subordinate their individual behaviour to group rules during play (p. 90). Morally responsible behaviour, in other



words, rather than self-seeking hedonistic action, might be fostered by the requirements of sociodramatic play:

By co-operating with others in a social group that is significant to them, [children] can gain direct experience of learning about what is morally right for that group as well as the opportunity to learn that reciprocity is of greater value than the maximisation of individual benefits.

(Smith *et al*, 1998, p. 226)

Our research must enquire, then, whether the attainment and continuance of successful social pretend play is indicative of the subjugation of individual, short-term interests for the sake of constructive social relationships engendered by morally responsible behaviour. That is, does the *form* as well as the *content* of sociodramatic play encourage a positive, socially committed conception of morality? Of course, in coming to pretend play a child is not a “blank sheet” bringing no previous moral understandings to the activity. On the contrary, the values, attitudes and beliefs of the child’s social environment will influence and inform the play itself. The relationship between the moral frameworks of the child’s real and fantasy worlds, in other words, will be transactional and mutually informative (Garvey, 1990, p. 145).

Pretend play would appear important, then, in developing each of the three interdependent areas of development which have been the subject of this section. It offers significant – and possibly unique – opportunities for children’s developing affective intelligence, for their burgeoning moral understanding, and for building a coherent, broad-based and integrated self-identity (Berg, 1999, p. 24).

## **5. Humour/Pleasure**

The fundamental importance of pleasure to play has already been touched upon several times during this work and will continue to feature

significantly throughout. Pleasure is an integral part of pretend play and a strong motivational factor in its occurrence: “Play is a tremendously enjoyable activity” (Smith, 1977, p. 130). The notion of humour, however, whilst possessing many very obvious connections to pleasure (humour is often intrinsically pleasurable, for instance), requires more detailed analysis if a suitable definition is to be operationalised during this research.

Many theories of humour abound (Bergson, 1980; Dunn, 1988), some more persuasive and convincing (and more pertinent to our present purposes) than others. The first theorist to investigate possible connections between humour and, specifically, play was Freud. He emphasised children’s use of incongruous elements to provoke laughter (Bergen, 2003, p. 45). McGhee also, following Piaget, itemised four stages of children’s humorous use of incongruity and categorised development through these four stages as, essentially, a cognitive process (Bergen, 2003, p. 45). However, theories of laughter which emphasise a yoking together of contrasting elements, or of laughter being the result of surprise are far from definitive (Ross, 1998). As Bergson notes, “surprise” and “contrast” are “definitions which would equally apply to a host of cases in which we have no inclination to laugh” (1980, p. 86). So what, if any, are the essential characteristics of humour which may be identified in all the multifarious humorous examples which daily confront us? Examples as diverse as the laughter arising from, for instance, a child’s innocent use of a malapropism (“Mummy, is that dog a puddle [poodle]?”), a teacher tripping up a flight of stairs in front of a group of pupils, or a fine performance of the “Pyramus and Thisbe” scene towards the end of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Or is the seeking of some quintessential component of comedy a mere chasing after shadows? As Bergson enquired as long ago as 1900 in his seminal essay on “Laughter”, would it be “idle to derive every comic effect from one simple formula” (p. 84)?

Although Purdie (1993) might be criticised for emphasising the linguistic features of comedy to the virtual exclusion of all other comic forms (little

mention is made, for instance, of purely visual humour such as slapstick), her analysis is particularly helpful in locating the breaking-and-marking-of-rules at the source of all humour: “Funniness involves at once breaking rules and ‘marking’ that break, so that correct behaviour is implicitly instated” (1993, p. 3). A joke, in other words, occurs at the point at which a rule is both simultaneously transgressed and recognised. To take two of the examples referred to above: the child’s misuse of the word “puddle” for “poodle” transgresses a semantic/verbal rule – a dog cannot be a puddle. The child, however, does not recognise the rule-break (and therefore does not laugh), the adult, on the other hand, does (and therefore laughs). In the example of the teacher falling up the stairs, it is a social – rather than linguistic – rule which is both breached and acknowledged (by the onlooking pupils at least, if not by the embarrassed teacher). A teacher is, normally, a virtually error-free figure of authority and respect and these norms are momentarily both broken and implicitly instated by the ungainly mistake of tripping up steps.

One can now begin to see how this rule-breaking-and-marking device for understanding the roots of humour may possess a more universal application than other theories of comedy – such as the “surprise” and “contrast” explanation previously referred to and proposed by the likes of Freud and McGhee. In order to clarify matters further, it might be worthwhile investigating an application of the surprise-and-contrast analysis of comedy to see if it is actually the breaching-and-recognising-of-rules which truly lies at the source of the mirth. Ross (1998) deconstructs the following W. C. Fields joke:

“Do you believe in clubs for young people?”

“Only when kindness fails.”

(p. 7)

It is, she argues, the surprising conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs which produces the joke – i.e. the punch-line is both a

surprise and a contrast to what was expected, given the first line. The audience is deliberately misled into thinking that “clubs” refers to social organisations, only then to realise that it is actually denoting “weapons” (p. 7). But surely there is more to the joke than Ross allows: as well as breaking a linguistic “rule” (i.e. when the word “clubs” is used in direct connection with “young people” it is reasonable to assume that we are referring to “youth clubs” or something similar rather than weapons), it is also breaking a rule of socially-appropriate behaviour: it is comically outrageous to conclude that young people should be bludgeoned if the use of kindness has not previously encouraged them to behave acceptably. Again, then, one might conclude that it is the breaking-and-marking-of-rules which essentially lies at the centre of a humorous occurrence rather than any other rationalisation. Significantly, Dunn draws similar conclusions from studying children’s use of humour: “Breaking the rules of what a parent permits is . . . a frequent source of amusement in children” (1988, p. 151).

The use of the W. C. Fields joke leads us on to another generally-pervasive feature of comedy. The notion of children being battered with clubs would usually be regarded as horrific and disturbing. Its use in a comic episode, though, somehow renders it not only “acceptable” but even laughable. In much the same way, the story of a man beating to death a distraught baby and its mother can be rendered suitable entertainment material for pre-school children by being ensconced within the *Punch and Judy* formula (Steiner, 1963). What is it about humour which annuls the horror in normally horrific subject matter? How narrow is the dividing line between comedy and tragedy, its supposed polar opposite? And how do these comic issues align with the preceding observations about laughter and rule-breaking?

Morris (1967) begins to provide some answers to these questions when he observes: “It is important to realise how similar crying and laughing are, as response patterns” (p. 102). Furthermore, the laughing reaction actually evolves – during the third or fourth month – out of the crying one as a

secondary signal, coinciding with the arrival of parental recognition (p. 103). In order to follow Morris's line of argument here, it is necessary to realise (as will be detailed further in the next sub-section) that laughter, like pretend play, needs to operate on two levels simultaneously – the “real” and the “fictional”. As Bergen notes, humour and pretence both require participants to act in an “as if” manner (2003, p. 47). Morris argues that laughter is produced when an infant acknowledges these two sets of opposing signals occurring at the same time. So, if a parent engages in, say, peek-a-boo or knee-dropping or lifting-high with a baby, one set of signals says, in effect, “I am your parent – your personal protector; there is nothing to fear,” (i.e. this is the “real” situation) while the other set says, “Look out, there's something frightening here” (i.e. this is the “as if” situation). The resultant reaction from the infant, Morris claims, is a combination of a parental-recognition gurgle and a cry of fear – that is, laughter (1967, p. 103). Moreover, the laughter can be interpreted as demonstrating the infant's recognition that an implied danger is not actually “real” – it is a form of pretence: “The mother can now play with the baby quite vigorously without making it cry” (pp. 103-4). Surely it is not a million miles from here to hypothesise that, as the child develops, if a potentially frightening subject can be rendered humorous – in effect, not “real” – then it can also be rendered “safe”. If the bogeyman in the wardrobe can be laughed at, he need hardly be feared. And the proximity of fear and comedy can so often be observed in young children's reactions to the “baddie” in traditional pantomimes and Walt Disney feature films. Whilst many children will relish their adopted hatred of the bad guy, for some the fear might be just a little too real and the watchful parent might comment, “He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.” Taken a step further, one can perhaps see how, with increasing maturity, humans can utilise humour as a safety/protective mechanism for a whole range of potentially frightening realities: death and disability can be laughed at; feared outsiders to one's social group can be made the butt of jokes; poverty and starvation can be the source of amusement (or, in the example given above, “super-human” authority figures such as teachers can be rendered human and capable of mistakes).

All of these are dangers which can be safely encountered because, if they are laughable, they are also, to use Morris's phrase, "not real" (1967, p. 104). Humour can be used as a kind of general anaesthetic to ward off all ills – something which is funny need not be feared, it is safe, its inherent danger is not real.

If humour, then, is intrinsically a safety-mechanism as well as also essentially concerned with rule-breaking-and-marking, how – if at all – do these two critiques of comedy cohere? In answer to this, it must be noted that humour will only be allowed to operate as a safety-mechanism so long as its transgression of rules is acceptable to those partaking in the joke. Comedy can "permit" obscenity, aggression, and so on, but only if the "permission" is mutually accepted (Purdie, 1993). It is not difficult to think of jokes about people with cerebral palsy or Down's syndrome or starving Africans – jokes which many of us would not find funny and which would continue to appal. If we do laugh at such jokes, however, and if the social barriers they violate are acceptable to us then, arguably, the horror will not be sensed by us because the laughter has rendered the subject matter and its inherent fear, in effect, "not real". Hence, Bergson's capacity – because he was writing in France in 1900 rather than a hundred years later – to ask with impunity, "Why does one laugh at a negro?" (p. 86). Today, most people in our society would be horrified at the notion of unavoidable laughter simply because someone has a black skin; in early 20<sup>th</sup> century France, however, it might be argued that a negro was a largely unknown (and therefore possibly threatening) outsider – to laugh at a negro, then, converted the potential danger into something risible and, consequently, "safe".

In summary, therefore, we might note that, while there are many theories of comedy including one which focuses essentially upon notions of incongruity (see, for instance, Nash, 1985), it is the dual notion of laughter-as-the-breaking-and-marking-of-rules and laughter-as-a-safety-mechanism (providing that the necessary rule-breaking which occurs is socially acceptable) which may well prove to be the most pertinent to my current

research. This is especially likely when one realises – as shall be analysed in the next section – that humour and sociodramatic play possess several features in common: two of which relate directly to the preceding discussion and are (i) their mutual reliance on “rules” and (ii) the fact that both need to operate on two levels of reality simultaneously in order to be successful.

### **5a. Sociodramatic Play and Humour/Pleasure**

There are, arguably, five componential features of sociodramatic play and humour which are common to both areas (certain of which have been explored in the previous section). The features in common are:

- i. Both are overwhelmingly **human**.
- ii. Both are necessarily **social**.
- iii. Both necessitate participants operating on **two planes of reality simultaneously**.
- iv. Both are intrinsically **pleasurable**.
- v. Both are highly **rule-orientated**.

I shall deal with each of these areas of commonality in turn.

#### **i. Both are overwhelmingly human.**

Although I have referred to a number of examples of play amongst higher primates in this work, sociodramatic play (that is, the joint adoption of characters and the mutual development of co-ordinated scenarios) is only to be found in human beings. Similarly, laughter – even though certain animals, such as hyenas, might be capable of producing laugh-like sounds – is an exclusively human trait (Morris, 1967). Once again, Bergson, writing in 1900, is particularly enlightening on this matter and delineates how comedy cannot exist beyond the human sphere: “A landscape may be beautiful, charming or ugly; it will never be laughable” (1980, p. 62). We may, of course, find humour in the antics of some animals – especially in the less-than-expert exploits of some of their young (itself a feature which may be regarded as the breaking-and-marking of rules: the rules of adult,

intended behaviour). Arguably, however, it is generally the human connections with animal behaviours and appearances which give rise to laughter. One has only to think of the “Monkey House” in a zoo to realise how it is the apes’ and chimpanzees’ similarities with human activity and the behaviours which would breach human taboos (their facial expressions, the explorations of each others’ faeces, the proclivity to copulate in public) which is ultimately the mainspring of their funniness. It is surely no coincidence that Will Self (1997) makes extensive use of this aspect of higher primate behaviour in his novel *Great Apes*. Indeed, Bergson – and also Meredith writing several years earlier in 1877 – both believe comedy not merely to be essentially human but even regard it as “a premise to civilisation” (Sypher, 1980, p. xvi). This observation very neatly takes us on to our second area of commonality.

**ii. Both are necessarily social.**

For some time, writers have drawn attention to the importance of the social context for both the creation and the reception of humour (Dunn, 1988; Nash, 1985; Purdie, 1993; Ross, 1998). Indeed, research has shown that people are far more likely to laugh at the same example of humour if it is received in a room full of people rather than alone (Ross, 1998, p. 1). Predictably, Bergson made similar observations over a hundred years ago, noting how difficult it is to appreciate comedy when you are feeling isolated from others: “Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. . . . How often has it been said that the fuller the theatre, the more uncontrolled the laughter of the audience!” (1980, pp. 64-5).

However, humour (and, for that matter, sociodramatic play) is not merely “social” in the sense that it requires more than one person in order to be successfully achieved, humour (and sociodramatic play) is also “social” in the sense that it nurtures and improves social relationships. Bergson, again, underlines the interpersonal utility of joking: “Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a *social* signification” (Bergson, 1980, p. 65). Dunn also highlights the usefulness of shared



humour in not only revealing but also fostering social understanding: “Discovering how to share a sense of absurdity and pleasure in the comic incidents of life is an important step toward intimacy” (1988, p. 168). Hannikainen (2001) similarly emphasises the beneficial social effects of “playful actions” and draws a number of parallels and overlaps between pretend play and humour. However, because of her failure adequately to define what she means by “playful actions” – the subject of her empirical research – the relationship between pretend play and humour, as manifested both within and outside of playful actions, is blurred and confused rather than analysed and clarified. Nonetheless, the positive social function of both play and humour is enumerated: “Playful actions . . . make their [i.e. children’s] everyday lives more interesting, exciting and meaningful. Moreover, a playful action is also . . . a way to communicate and express positive feelings to other people” (2001, pp. 132-3). Both play and humour, then, it would appear from Hannikainen’s research, can not only operate within a social context, but even (as we noted in the section on Sociodramatic Play and Perspective Taking/Social Cognition) help build and reinforce positive social relationships.

### **iii. Both necessitate participants operating on *two planes of reality* simultaneously.**

It may not be entirely coincidental that, as stated earlier, the arrival of an infant’s ability to laugh coincides with an infant’s ability to recognise its parent (Morris, 1967). This allows the parent, during rough-and-tumble play, to give the child a double signal: “There’s danger but there’s no danger” (Morris, 1967, p. 103). On occasions such as this we are, then, simultaneously operating in both the real and the fictional domains: the “real” domain tells the baby there is nothing to fear, it is only mother having fun; the “fictional” domain tells the baby this is what the frightening situation would be like IF it were for real and IF it were being perpetrated by someone other than mother: “There may appear to be danger, but because it is coming from me, you do not need to take it seriously” (Morris, 1967, p. 103). One can hypothesise from this as to why, possibly, play is so

frequently taken to be a non-serious (and therefore relatively unimportant) activity. If play is fun and unthreatening (because it is “unreal”), then perhaps one can excuse those people who deduce from this that play is consequently frivolous and of little genuine import: play is not serious, play is not real, *ergo* play is of little consequence in the truly important business of life-as-it-is-really-lived. This may also help to account for the perennial downgrading of humour and comedy as opposed to more “serious” pursuits; note Meredith in 1877: “Comedy, we have to admit, was never one of the most honoured of the Muses” (1980, p. 5).

But to return to the matter of humour operating simultaneously on two planes. Pretend play (as we noted in the section on Sociodramatic Play and Cognitive Development) appears to be a pivotal stage in the progression towards symbolic functioning. Similarly, the “dual” awareness that is an essential pre-requisite for recognising humour (the joke is both “real” and “unreal”, the rule is both “broken” and “marked”) may indicate that humour is significant in, or at least comparable to, abstract, conceptual thinking: “In this light, joking appears as central in the construction of Symbolic agency” (Purdie, 1993, p. 16). Let us revert to some of the examples of humour already referred to in an attempt to clarify this purported relationship between joking and the ability to think abstractedly. In order to “get” the W. C. Fields joke, for instance, one has simultaneously to understand both what was actually referred to as well as the meaning which was expected: one has to hold in mind the twin notions of “clubs” as “bludgeons” as well as “clubs” as “social organisations”. Likewise, the pupils laughing at the teacher falling on the stairs must not only see the reality of the mishap but they must also hold on to the abstract notion of teacher-as-authority-figure; only then are they aware that a particular “symbolic rule” (teachers do not make fools of themselves) has been violated (Purdie, 1993). Joking, in other words, would appear to demand a similar (if not identical) capability to that utilised in disembedded thinking – conceptual operation which occurs away from the concrete realities which immediately surround us. Perhaps it is not without significance, then, that “Small children . . . begin to joke as soon as

they reach symbolic competence” (Purdie, 1993, p. 54). Joking involves understanding on both the “symbolic” as well as the “real” planes of reality – just as pretend play does.

If joking does indeed necessitate such simultaneous operation in both the “real” and the “pretend/symbolic” worlds, then this would appear to be at odds with Piaget (1962) who argued that, for three year olds, “the distinction between the realms of reality and fantasy are [*sic*] at best blurred” (cited in Golomb and Kuersten, 1996, p. 204). As anyone who has knowledge of three year olds will vouchsafe, they are more than capable of engaging in shared humour (Dunn, 1988). Does this mean that the connection I have drawn between joking and the pretend/reality divide does not hold water? On the contrary, I believe it is Piaget who is guilty of underestimating young children’s ability to operate simultaneously in the worlds of both reality and fantasy. The naturalistic observations of Wolf and Hicks (1989) “seem to support the notion that young children . . . are able to make the distinction between fantasy and reality” (cited in Golomb and Kuersten, 1996, p. 204). Likewise, Golomb and Kuersten’s own empirical study into children’s pretend play utilising adult interventions concluded that: “Young preschoolers seemed to have no difficulty crossing the boundaries of fantasy and reality in their play” (1996, p. 215). It would appear, then, not only that the ability of a child to share a joke has much in common with the ability of a child to engage in pretend play (both necessitate simultaneous operations in the real and the symbolic domains) but also that these capacities have connections with the ability to think conceptually – which likewise, of course, involves mental operations away from the immediate actualities of the “real” world.

#### **iv. Both are intrinsically pleasurable.**

Perhaps the most noticeable and pervasive feature of play – and also the least researched – is that it is pleasurable (Mellou, 1993, p. 14). The young of all higher species indulge in frolicking, cavorting and pretend fighting with no apparent utilitarian objective (Garvey, 1990, p. 3). Children engage

in play for the sheer enjoyment and/or excitement it brings (Huizinga, 1977, p. 675; Moyles, 1989, p. 7; Sutton-Smith, 1980, p. 11). Play and pleasure can be seen to be linked in a variety of ways: the development of play parallels the development of smiling (Garvey, 1990, p. 170); play only occurs “in an atmosphere of familiarity, emotional reassurance, and lack of tension or danger” (Bruner, 1991, p. 256); and the child who is unhappy does not, of course, play (Garvey, 1990, p. 22).

As previously mentioned, the enjoyment derived from playing can have significant motivational (and, ultimately, socialising) consequences. In the research by Sylva, Bruner and Genova (1976) discussed earlier, what was remarkable was not just the success of the pupils who had been merely asked to play with the clamps and the sticks, but the fact that they continued to enjoy the objects and play with them after the test had been completed. The element of “playfulness” overcame any notion of frustration and “giving up” – “the children, after all, were playing” (p. 16). Van Oers and Hannikainen (2001) hypothesise a similar reason for the children’s perseverance in their study of a teacher and four six-year-old children collaboratively composing a story: “It is probably the play element in the children’s work that constitutes a strong factor for these children to keep on working together,” (p. 107). Smith and Dutton (1979) likewise comment on the potency of play as an enhancer of motivated task-oriented activity (cited in Vandenberg, 1980, p. 58). For Vygotsky (1976), “playfulness” was a critical feature of play and of the socialisation of the child. He noted a fundamental paradox in play: in the first place, during play children adopt the line of least resistance – i.e. they are doing what they are doing because play is associated with pleasure. Simultaneously, however, the children are following the line of greatest resistance in that they are subordinating their own spontaneous, impulsive desires to the rules of joint pretend play: “Play continually creates demands on the child to act against immediate impulse” (1976, p. 548). As previously discussed in sections 3 and 4a of this *Literature Review*, the subordination of one’s own wishes to the imperatives of the group during sociodramatic play is surely significant in the successful

socialisation of the child – and it is the pleasure in play which, arguably, enables this to occur.

**v. Both are highly rule-orientated.**

In “The Rules of the Game of Marbles” (1976), Piaget notes how, from its first living moments, notions of regularity and order are brought to bear upon a baby. Meals, bed-time, the alternation of night and day, and so on, all “conspire to impress upon the baby” the predictability and “law-governed” nature of life-as-it-is-lived: “From its earliest months the child is therefore bathed in an atmosphere of rules” (Piaget, 1976, pp. 430-1). And as we noted in the previous section, Piaget argues that the passing on of rules and certain accepted norms of behaviour is inextricably connected with the developing moral understanding of the child: “Consciousness of rules cannot be isolated from the moral life of the child as a whole” (1976, p. 430). In imposing certain regularities upon a baby, the parents are, thereby, imposing certain moral obligations (and, of course, cultural norms) upon it as well: in learning the rule that we do not throw food around the room, for instance, the infant is also learning to conform to a moral expectation (unlike the chimps in the zoo referred to above). As we observed in the section on Sociodramatic Play and Identity Construction/Emotional and Moral Development, moral growth cannot be isolated from other aspects of development.

However, not only is real life highly rule-governed but so too, as Vygotsky noted, is play. Indeed, the more rigid and demanding the rules, the greater the pleasure potentially to be gained from the play: “Simply running around without purpose or rules is boring and does not appeal to children” (1978, p. 103). In fact, Vygotsky goes even further than this and proposes that “there is no such thing as play without rules” (1978, p. 94). As Huizinga observes, “As soon as the rules are transgressed, the whole play-world collapses. The game is over” (1977, p. 678). Vygotsky gives two examples which substantiate this claim and which also underline the importance of rules to both play and development *per se*. When a young girl is playing with a doll

and imagines herself to be a mother to a child, she is, Vygotsky argues, obeying “the rules of maternal behaviour” (1978, p. 94). Similarly, when two sisters are playing at being two sisters, there is a vital difference between the pretence and the reality. In life, the sisters behave as their sister’s sister without thinking about it; in play, though, both girls are concerned with consciously displaying their sisterhood and adhere to those rules of behaviour which externally highlight this: “They dress alike, talk alike, in short, they enact whatever emphasises their relationship as sisters” (1978, p. 95). And through the observance, adherence and portrayal of such rules in active play, the girls’ understanding of what the concept of sisterhood means (previously only held implicitly) becomes conscious and explicit: “What passes unnoticed by the child in real life becomes a rule of behaviour in play” (1978, p. 95). Bruner and Sherwood (1976) in their study of “peekaboo” similarly emphasise the importance of rules and their observation to successful shared play: The child very soon becomes sensitive to the “rules of the game” as he [*sic*] plays it” (p. 27). However, Bruner and Sherwood also note that what is most striking about the playing of peekaboo is not the slavish adherence to pre-determined rules but rather “the systematic introduction of variations constrained by set rules” (1976, p. 283). The child, then, is not only learning the basic rules of the game but, more crucially, the range of variation and development that is permissible within them. Piaget draws similar conclusions from observing the playing of marbles. Variation within a rule-governed pattern is what has led to the fact that “there is never one single way of playing marbles, there are quantities of ways” (1976, p. 414). Indeed, “variations occur from one generation to another” (p. 414).

However, the importance of rules to play, their exploration and variation, would appear to be at odds with Garvey’s comments that: “Violation of the rules, norms or accepted procedures that shape and guide social behaviours can, under certain conditions, result in play. . . . some kind of rule has been violated or distorted in a playful performance” (1990, pp. 92 and 97). What appears to be at issue here is a question of semantics. Whilst Garvey refers

to the “violation” of rules in play, it is more likely to be the case (and my research tests this thesis) that it is the bending rather than the breaking of rules which is permissible in play. The experimental, exploratory nature of play allows boundaries to be safely tested and possibly stretched, it does not allow them to be breached: “The naked ape, even as an adult, is a playful ape. . . . He [*sic*] is constantly pushing things to their limit . . . without getting hurt” (Morris, 1967, p. 104). And one can think of many examples of adult game-playing which involve “pushing things to their limit”: gambling, for instance, involves emotional enjoyment being derived from danger and risk-taking (Bateson, 1976, p. 122).

As detailed above, it is, of course, laughter (rather than play) which results when rules are actually broken (rather than bent). Thus, if I am playing a game of football and amaze my team-mates with a series of previously unseen, but legitimate, ball tricks, the game will continue. If, however, I pick the ball up and start running with it towards the opposition’s goal, my team-mates may laugh (or conversely be extremely angry) but the game cannot continue as the rules have been broken. In spite of the several parallels between sociodramatic play and humour, then, (they are both human, both social, both operate simultaneously on two planes of reality and both are pleasurable) there is also a, possibly significant, distinction between the two – one is concerned with the observance and variation of rules whilst the other is concerned with their violation and marking. Might this difference result in the two being inimical to one another? Can both sociodramatic play and humour occur simultaneously and in complementarity? My research endeavours to find this out.

### **Relationship of Literature and Research Questions to Field Work**

In summary, my reading of the literature has encouraged me to delineate three particular (but overlapping) research questions:

1. What types of development are nurtured through children’s sociodramatic play?

2. How do these aspects of development manifest themselves during sociodramatic play?
3. How might these various types of development interrelate during sociodramatic play?

My literature reading has, as previously noted, highlighted five interlocking areas of development for particular scrutiny and analysis; these are sociodramatic play and: (i) cognitive development; (ii) language development; (iii) perspective taking/social cognition; (iv) identity construction/emotional and moral development; and (v) humour/pleasure. In analysing and discussing the data, therefore, I have been especially observant for instances when, during sociodramatic play, any of these five areas of development appears to have been manifested and I have theorised about how play may (or may not) be helping to nurture these specific developmental areas as well as about potential connections between them. It would have been conceivable, of course, for my analysis to have adopted a more “grounded” approach and for me to have put these five pre-determined categories to one side whilst I combed the collected and collated information for data-driven categories concerning the value of sociodramatic play. However, it must be remembered that, in part at least, these five categories were already “data-driven” – I had initially expected to focus on the cognitive, linguistic, social and affective aspects of social pretend play but my pilot and subsequent research insisted upon raising issues concerned with identity construction, moral development, pleasure and humour. In essence, then, my field work as well as the literature has contributed to the formulation and the operationalisation of these five areas of development.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **FIELD WORK**

#### **Research Methodology**

In order to describe and analyse sociodramatic play and the five areas of development outlined in the previous chapter, and to theorise about their possible inter-connections, arguably the most useful and relevant data I could hope to produce would be that which equates most closely to a naturalistic setting – that is, where the distorting effects of an outside observer are most openly acknowledged and minimised. Interestingly, however, many studies which I have encountered during my reading opted for an essentially experimental rather than ethnographic approach (for instance, Dansky and Silverman, 1976; Hickling, Wellman and Gottfried, 1997; Hutt and Bhavnani, 1976; Mellou, 1981; Perlmutter and Pellegrini, 1987; Tan-Niam, 1994, 1998). On closer inspection, the reasoning behind such methodological decision-making is perhaps not difficult to discern. Many of the aforementioned researchers are, essentially, psychologists interested in what are primarily cognitive aspects of pretend play. Thus, Dansky and Silverman (1976) and Hutt and Bhavnani (1976) opted for an experimental approach when investigating the effects of pretend play on creative thinking. Hickling, Wellman and Gottfried (1997) and Tan-Niam (1994, 1998) understandably decided upon an empirical methodology to research possible links between pretend play and perspective-taking abilities. Perlmutter and Pellegrini (1987) were interested in children's linguistic progression and Mellou (1981) in cognitive development and object substitution: again, it is hardly surprising that these researchers chose to utilise essentially experimental, laboratory-based research methods. What we have in these examples, then, is a collection of psychologists adopting research methodologies which are, in all likelihood, the most familiar to them; which are, arguably, suited to the investigation of fundamentally psychological/cognitive aspects of pretend play; and which, as Dunn (1998, p. 102) points out, possess the intrinsic advantage of enabling more “clear-cut” inferences to be made than might be the case with fundamentally

naturalistic data. However, the reasons which can be inferred behind the adoption of such experimental research methods are precisely the same reasons which led me to opt for a more naturalistic, ethnographic approach. I am not a psychologist and have no experience in conducting laboratory-based research nor, indeed, in utilising statistical analysis to interrogate such data. What is more, I am not solely, nor even primarily, interested in the connections between sociodramatic play and fundamentally cognitive aspects of development. On the contrary, as my research progressed I became increasingly aware of and absorbed by the importance of the linkages between pretend play and:

1. social factors (including: interaction with peers, adult intervention, environmental influences, object stimuli, rule-adherence);
2. affective features of development (such as: motivation, caring, having fun);
3. intrapersonal aspects (for example: self-concept, self-esteem, role-modelling, morality).

Consequently, Dunn's arguments (1998, p. 102) regarding the benefits of attaining naturalistic data in research of this kind appeared particularly persuasive. In brief, she details three *a priori* advantages for unstructured observation, each of which can be directly linked to the three, "non-psychological" areas of development listed above: in the first place, this kind of research potentially yields contextual information (such as those features noted in 1. above) which is not necessarily available in the laboratory; secondly, children can be studied in social settings which have real emotional significance for them (see 2. above) rather than the potentially unfamiliar surroundings of a "psychological workroom"; and finally, ethnographic research allows us to study the comments and behaviours generated by the children themselves rather than those imposed by an adult psychologist (see 1., 2. and 3. above). My field work, therefore, adopted an ethnographic approach (that is, "the observational study of small groups of people within society" [ Open University, 1991, p. 6]) and, as well

as utilising observation, employed the taking of field-notes, audio- and video-recording of children's play and its transcription, the keeping of a "research diary", and post-observation semi-structured interviews with the class teachers and relevant children in an attempt to triangulate and validate the data. Each of these strands of my chosen methodology (and their various implications, ramifications and, where applicable, associated problems) is discussed during the remainder of this chapter.

### **Sampling**

It almost goes without saying that a variety of factors informed my sampling decisions with regard both to the schools I selected for visiting and also the children chosen to participate in my research. In the interests of reliability and validity, the selected samples necessarily had to be characteristic and representative of the population as a whole (Greig and Taylor, 1999, p. 59). On the other hand, the size of my sample could not be too large given the logistical constraints – such as limited time – of this research (Bell, 1993, pp. 82-3). In attempting to select a sample which was neither unmanageable nor unrepresentative, therefore, I decided to choose schools with a significantly white European catchment. This is not to infer that cross-cultural issues are irrelevant to research concerning the value of sociodramatic play, but rather that to extend the scope of this work to include such matters would have been straining its feasibility. However, I did decide to include schools with differing socio-economic catchments. The hope here was that, should social class show itself to be a significant issue, then I might be able to deal with it in a reasonably thorough way without over-taxing the limits of this study. I selected, therefore, a total of three schools, with different socio-economic catchment areas, in the belief that this number would be both manageable as well as sufficiently representative. Also with regard to attempting to make my sample as characteristic as possible of the population as a whole, I decided to use equal numbers of both boys and girls and to draw them from across the "academic ability" range. Once again with concern for feasibility, I chose to focus upon eight children in each school, thus giving me a total research

population of 24 children – hopefully, this was neither too small to be unrepresentative nor too large to be unachievable.

However, it was not purely considerations of representativeness which affected my sampling decisions. I was also concerned that my data collection should yield sufficient opportunities for accruing usable material and I therefore selected schools where I knew the reception class teacher(s) to place a strong emphasis on the educational utility of pretend play. The preparatory meetings which I held with each of the three headteachers also confirmed the notion that all these schools were ideologically committed to the benefits of play for young children and each headteacher bemoaned the relative lack of curricular time for such activity. In this light, my sampling strategy can be regarded as being “purposive” or “judgemental” in that I used my judgement to ensure that the sample was selected on the basis of the information required (Greig and Taylor, 1999, p. 59). After all, there seemed to be hardly any point in spending time in schools where little or no sociodramatic play actually occurred.

The result of all these aforementioned considerations was the choosing of three schools within my locality which I shall term, following Shakespeare’s lead and for reasons of anonymity, “Agincourt”, “Elsinor” and “Harfleur”. The data collection for the first phase of my research was carried out during November 2000 (week beginning Monday, 13<sup>th</sup>) at Elsinor Primary School; the second phase was conducted at Agincourt Primary School during March 2002 (week beginning Monday, 18<sup>th</sup>); and the third phase at Harfleur Primary School during October and November 2002 (week beginning Monday, 28<sup>th</sup> October).

As stated, my original intention was to observe, record, transcribe and analyse the sociodramatic play of eight reception class children in each school. In Elsinor Primary School, however, one selected child was actually absent during the three days of recording, and in Agincourt Primary School one selected child refused to participate, thus leaving me with seven

children as the subjects of my study in each of these cases. In an attempt to redress somewhat this slight “shortfall”, I recorded and observed nine reception class children in Harfleur; consequently, my total research population was 23 four- and five-year-old children. Social pretend play is highly prevalent during this age-range (Goncu, 1998, p. 121; Smith, 1977, p. 126) and thus – especially in the light of my earlier comments regarding the emphasis these particular teachers placed on pretend play – I hoped that the chances of my obtaining sufficient relevant data would be optimised. I further endeavoured to increase the likelihood of acquiring usable material by recording the children in pairs and during free play within symmetrical relationships (that is, free play with peers as opposed to play incorporating direct adult intervention [Open University, 1999, p. 92]) as Moyles had found that: “Richer and more varied verbal communication occurred between peers, particularly in pairs . . . in free play activity compared with directed activity” (1989, p. 141). Smith similarly found that dyadic play (as opposed to larger social groupings) was the most common arrangement whether participants were as young as two and a half or as old as five (1977, pp. 126-7). Goncu and Kessel also divided their sample “into same-age and same-sex dyads, the members of each dyad being friends with one another” (1984, p. 15). Although I did not specifically ask the teachers to select pairings of children who were friends, when I sought the teachers’ assistance as to which pair of children should next be given the radio mics (as I did on every occasion), the teachers without exception chose two children whom they believed would be likely to play co-operatively together. Indeed, when I interviewed the teachers at Harfleur on this point, they explicitly stated their belief that friendship was one of the important factors enabling the children to play successfully in concert:

	<u>Mr Meakin</u>	<u>Ms. “Britten”</u>	<u>Ms. “Swift”</u>
1.	Have you any theories		
2.	as to why you think		
3.	the children in this		
4.	school appear to play		

5. so well together?
6. A lot of them know
7. each other, don't they.
8. From nursery and
9. from playgroup
10. friendships have
11. been formed.

Furthermore, taking a lead from Perlmutter and Pellegrini (1987) and again with the class teacher's assistance, I endeavoured in each school to ensure that the play materials available would help stimulate and facilitate sociodramatic play for both boys and girls. In Elsinor Primary School, this consideration led to areas being set up to encourage: school play, parent play and birthday party play. In Agincourt, the restaurant corner – a semi-permanent feature of the classroom – was deemed to be the most appropriate area for our purposes. And in Harfleur, several different parts of the atrium were available for sociodramatic play. Interestingly, however, the props and costumes at hand in Harfleur were ultimately seen to possess something of a gender bias. The need for three boys to transform vacuum cleaners into fire engines (again, this shall be discussed in more detail in due course) prompted me to question Harfleur's reception teachers as to whether there were sufficient toys available to promote the kinds of play favoured by boys. All teachers were adamant that "violent" play should not be encouraged but they did, on reflection, state that more "boy-friendly" props should be considered for the play areas. During my time in Harfleur, only two fire-fighters' helmets and a few replica tools fell directly into this category:

Ms. Britten

Ms. Swift

1. I mean I was shocked actually . . .
2. 'cause we thought we were quite
3. equal, didn't we? We thought
4. we'd got things out here that were,

5. like, equal opportunities. We
6. thought we'd got equal for boys
7. and girls.
8. We thought 'cause there's a
9. toolkit.
10. This has made us think actually,
11. hasn't it?

Clearly, in the light of these observations, early years practitioners may well be advised to give close consideration to the toys, props and costumes available in their play areas and to ensure that sufficient materials are available to stimulate pretence amongst both girls and boys. Indeed, teachers in Bennett *et al*'s study explicitly noted the need to ensure "there's a balance and a variety in all the activities that are on offer" (1997, p. 37).

With further regard to issues surrounding the notion of sampling in research, the selected children were proposed by the class teacher (a "key informant" – Ball, 1993, p. 40) after I had asked for the following (and aforementioned) considerations to be borne in mind: (i) the children were to consist of four boys and four girls; and (ii) they would reflect a wide academic ability range. As the children in each school were all in the reception class, there was necessarily not an age range greater than twelve months. Needless to say, I still had to be constantly aware of bias creeping into my research as a result of sampling decisions (Ball, 1993, p. 40) including the possibility that the children might not be as representative of the population as a whole as I had originally intended. It is notable that parental permission was refused for two of the selected children in Agincourt School (and two more children, therefore, had to be chosen by the reception class teachers) and in Harfleur permission was only granted for one particular child on condition that a member of the school staff was present throughout. This might indicate methodological, and ethical, difficulties for much future educational research, especially in the light of certain recent tragic events nationally as well as initiatives such as more stringent Criminal Records Bureau vetting.

Another consequence of allowing the class teachers to take prime responsibility for sampling decisions as well as deciding the pairs of children to be “miced together” at any one time, was that in Elsinor Primary School, Ms. “Parr” (as she later informed me during the semi-structured interview with her) independently decided to include a child (“Colin”) in her sample who, whilst “academically bright”, did not find it easy to engage in sociodramatic play. Furthermore, she chose to pair him with the more outgoing “Edward” – some of the consequences of this decision will be discussed later.

In continuing the discussion regarding the sampling decisions I made and the reasons underpinning them, some detail must now be given concerning the nature of the three schools I ultimately decided to use for my study. Particular reference will be made to their ideologies regarding play and the provision of play opportunities.

### **Elsinor**

The first of these, Elsinor Primary School, is a school with a semi-rural location but quite a broad socio-economic catchment. The ethnic composition of the school is almost exclusively white European. There are just over 200 pupils in Elsinor of which, during the time of my field work there, 16 were in the reception class – the class where I conducted my research. The recordings were made on three consecutive afternoons in November 2000, although I was present throughout the day on each occasion and thereby able to observe – and participate in – the more formal curricular activities taking place each morning. The reception class teacher in Elsinor – Ms. Parr – had stated on previous occasions to me her opinion of the importance of social pretend play and she was keen to make every effort to facilitate and encourage such activity during afternoon sessions. Consequently, Ms. Parr had a whole “store” of boxes containing different props and costumes designed to stimulate themed pretence and she would frequently vary which boxes were placed out on tables in order to help prevent the children becoming bored with the same old paraphernalia. These



boxes had such titles as “School”, “Hospital”, “Birthday Party”, “Garage”, “Cookery”, and so on. However, during my pilot research at this school in 1999, I had focussed my recording and observation solely upon one area of the classroom – “The Home Corner” – which was a permanent feature of the layout of the room and contained a variety of props, furniture and dressing-up clothes. In choosing to use this single area, I had been able to secrete myself away alongside the mixing equipment, “eavesdrop” on headphones the children’s conversation and observe their activity without being too conspicuous a presence to the children themselves. Whilst the Home Corner had proved successful in stimulating prolonged pretend activity during my pilot research, it had also, unsurprisingly, encouraged pretence along a broadly similar theme – which could be called something like “domesticity”. I had intended to adopt the same procedure – this time armed with a video camera as well as radio mics – during my second phase of research in Elsinor. However, when I arrived at the school on the first morning of recording, I was informed that the Home Corner was “out of bounds” as one of its windows had been broken. This forced me, of course, to focus my attention (and the video camera) on the tables where various play boxes were set out. Fortuitously, as it transpired, this resulted in my being able to record what was possibly a greater variety of themed play than might otherwise have been the case. Perhaps there is a lesson here for early-years teachers concerning the desirability of providing a breadth and frequently-changing assortment of play stimuli in order to try to appeal to all children (of both genders), to broaden their range of play references and to help prevent the danger of boredom setting in.

### **Agincourt**

The second school, Agincourt Primary, is a similar size to Elsinor, it too has a mainly white European composition, but the vast majority of its pupils – as it is located on a council housing estate – are from a working-class background. Although social class was not initially intended to be a consideration within the remit of my research, I believed that, as detailed above, should my data determine that it was both necessary and feasible to

pursue this line of inquiry, then the topic of social class could be accommodated within my study. Indeed, certain readings around the subject had already raised the possible importance of socio-economic factors to social pretend play and had actually led me to fear that obtaining relevant data might well be more problematic in Agincourt Primary School (because of its far higher ratio of working-class children) than in Elsinor. Smith's research (1977, p. 140), for instance, noted how children from working-class backgrounds showed less sociodramatic play than middle-class children and Smith *et al* (1998, p. 191) cite several studies which have suggested that children from "disadvantaged" homes exhibit less frequent and less complex fantasy play than their middle-class counterparts. Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds probably also receive less encouragement from their parents to engage in sociodramatic play (Smith, 1988, p. 193). But perhaps it was not solely issues of social class which led to my being able to record far fewer amounts of successful sociodramatic play at Agincourt than at either Elsinor or Harfleur. As previously alluded to, there was only one area of Agincourt's classroom which was explicitly "geared up" for sociodramatic play: namely, the restaurant corner. Whilst this area was reasonably well-equipped with a variety of play props and play materials, its ever-present nature might possibly have meant that it lacked a certain degree of novel stimulation for the children. Also, it was very much a part of the classroom as a whole, bordered off only by the arrangement of some of the furniture. Consequently, distractions from activities progressing in other parts of the classroom were various and frequent. Moreover, although there was a class rule stating that no more than four children were allowed in the area at any one time (and a sign saying as much), I frequently observed children circumventing this rule and accessing the play area – normally to the annoyance (and distraction) of those children already in the restaurant corner. Once again, possible lessons for the facilitation of sociodramatic play in reception classrooms might be evident here. What constraints do we need to place upon children in order to try and ensure that they themselves are able to play freely without causing a negative effect

upon the play of others? How “exclusive”, and how varying and various, do the play areas ideally need to be?

### **Harfleur**

My third and final primary school – Harfleur – is approximately twice the size of the other two with over four hundred children on role. Like Elsinor and Agincourt, it has a predominantly white, European, middle-class catchment. Due to its size, Harfleur possesses three reception classes and my sample of children, with input from all three reception teachers, was drawn from across all three groupings. The three reception classrooms in Harfleur are all connected by an atrium in which most of the children’s pretend play activities occur and which afforded me near-ideal circumstances for recording purposes. The atrium facility meant that the children could play with little or no distraction from peers engaged in other activities and the generous and varying amounts of free space allowed me to “secrete” myself and my recording equipment away from the children’s main play areas whilst still being able to observe their activities in a relatively unobtrusive manner. The atrium, in other words, appeared to offer me an almost perfect combination of the naturalistic and experimental environments – the children were able to engage in a variety of dyadic play activities, in their accustomed school surroundings, whilst I was able to note and record their play without, for the most part, extraneous noise and interruption from other children. It is perhaps hardly surprising then, given the relative lack of distraction in Harfleur’s atrium and its range of assorted play areas, that the children here were generally able to engage more immediately and in a more sustained manner in sociodramatic play than in either of my other two schools. There might well be a lesson here for teachers whose children experience difficulties in engaging in social pretend play – a more “private” and multi-featured environment with fewer extraneous diversions (should one be able to be sourced) might be one way of improving the quality and the quantity of play, as well as other initiatives which I shall come to anon. Interestingly, the few occasions when there were extraneous distractions in Harfleur – such as other children walking

through the atrium or myself altering the camera position – almost always interrupted the children’s play momentarily until the distraction passed and play could be resumed. It is at least worth noting at this point that Umek and Musek in their study of the effects of the environment on children’s fantasy play concluded that “the level and complexity” of symbolic play are affected by both play materials and play context (2001, p. 55). In light of this and the findings of my own research, therefore, early-years practitioners may well be advised to give detailed consideration to the play environments they provide for their children – including the contents therein and its variety and novelty, as well as potential distractions from other activities – if they are to optimise the nature and quality of their children’s social pretend play.

As previously stated, and in the interests of reliability, I had no intention of using the data collected on my first day of recording in each school. However, my initial tapes and observations in Agincourt Primary School confirmed my fears that sociodramatic play might well be less prevalent in this school than in Elsinor or Harfleur. The video camera had been set up in the Agincourt classroom next to the previously-mentioned “restaurant”. The reception class teachers (there were two in Agincourt – Ms. “Pollard” and Ms. “Murphy” – as they were on a “job share”) had identified this area as the most conducive to sociodramatic play on a previous visit of mine to the school. However, of the near one hour of recordings made on the first day, no instances of sustained sociodramatic play were observed. One child – “Craig” – was noted as making repeated attempts to engage others in shared pretence over a nine-minute period but none was successful. The recordings made on the second and third days of my data collection (that is, the recordings which I would actually be analysing) confirmed my fears. Only one instance of sustained shared pretence (i.e. lasting more than three “turns”) within symmetrical relationships was documented and this lasted less than three minutes. This play involved three children – “Angie”, “Mary” and “Craig” plus, very intermittently, “Jack” – and I have termed it the *Bonfire Night and Frightened Doggy* episode. For ease of reference,

each episode of sustained sociodramatic play which I recorded in each school has been given its own “play-title”. It is hoped that this might assist the reader in keeping track of the discussions across a range of play episodes. In passing, I have deemed an “episode” of sociodramatic play – to refer back to the definition given earlier – to be an instance of pretend play between two or more children where a mutual focus is attained and where characters and story-line are developed in a complementary, co-operative manner. As previously noted, I have used a minimum length of three “turns” in the belief that any exchange briefer than this cannot really be held to denote a joint development of either character or story-line. I have regarded the conclusion of an episode as being the time when mutual focus, for whatever reason, is abandoned and conjoined attempts to continue the plot and characterisations are ended.

But to return to the discussion about the effects of my sampling decisions upon the quantities of usable material acquired. Unlike the dearth of relevant data I was able to collect in Agincourt, of the near three hours of recording I made in Elsinor Primary School, three passages of sustained sociodramatic play (totalling some twenty-four minutes) were obtained. In other words, although the recording periods at Elsinor were nearly twice as long in total as those at Agincourt, they actually exhibited more than eight times the duration of sustained shared pretence within symmetrical relationships. The passages of sociodramatic play at Elsinor involved a total of only four of the children I observed and were:

1. “Edward” and “Colin” playing at *School*.
2. “Andrea” and “Lizzy” playing at *School* and sporadically joined by Edward and Colin.
3. Lizzy and Colin playing at *Parents*.

As will be discussed in the next section, examples were manifested within these three play passages of all five areas of development which I wished to

analyse. The same cannot be said about the one sustained play passage I recorded at Agincourt.

My work in Harfleur Primary School – probably for the aforementioned reasons – was even more fruitful than in Elsinor. On the second and third days of my recording in this school I was able to capture four passages of sustained sociodramatic play totalling two hours and nine minutes – that is, the children were almost constantly engaged in shared pretend play during my entire recording period in Harfleur. On a *pro rata* basis, this is about six times more than I recorded in Elsinor and approximately forty eight times more than in Agincourt – surely this further underlines the beneficial impact which a favourable environment can have on the quantity of social pretend play, as well as providing additional emphasis to my earlier comments regarding children’s play and social class. The episodes in Harfleur were:

1. “Alice” and “Zelda” playing at *Poorly Baby Sister* (36 minutes).
2. “Jock” and “Larry” playing at *Pizzas and Fires* (23 minutes).
3. Jock and “Jim” playing at *Eating, Fire-fighting and Shopping* (32 minutes).
4. “Rebecca” and “Kathy” playing at *Mummy and Big Sister* (38 minutes).

The three schools involved in this study, then, were chosen to include a level of consistency and also a degree of variety in the circumstances encountered. I specifically did not conduct field work in either a single-sex school or a school with a highly varied ethnic composition as issues such as gender and cross-cultural comparisons were considered to be beyond the scope of my research. The choosing of schools with different social catchments did result in some consideration having to be given to pretend play and social class. In a completely unforeseen manner – as shall be discussed in due course – this topic also resulted in time and attention being devoted to the problematic area of children’s play and teacher intervention.

Another occasion, notice, when my field work has encouraged me to reconsider my theoretical perspective and to further my background reading.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In order to retain the assured anonymity of everyone involved in this research, all names used are, of course, fictional. Furthermore, in order to ensure that adequate and appropriate information was given to all concerned and that acceptable procedures were followed, the data collection in each school was preceded by: (i) my obtaining permission to conduct the research from the respective headteachers, reception class teachers and governors of the school, as well as giving them detailed information about the nature and perceived importance of my research; (ii) discussions with the reception class teachers to select the particular children I would focus upon in my study (see below); (iii) written permission from the respective parents/guardians to work with their children as the subjects for my research; (iv) a series of visits to the school in general and to the reception class in particular in order to begin to make myself a “familiar face” to the children (see *Appendix A* for examples of some of these written communications). Throughout these preparatory communications I was careful not “to minimise nor indeed exaggerate the demands that [were] to be made in terms of time, effort, or stress on subjects” (Dockrell, 1996, p. 62).

During my time in each school I endeavoured to find ways to “give” as well as to “take” – a very important ethical consideration when conducting research within a school (Stenhouse, 1996). My involvement in each school meant a not-inconsiderable increase in the workload of a number of already busy people. Headteachers, teachers and non-teaching staff all afforded me significant amounts of their time in discussions before, during and after my data collection. Ethically, therefore, it seemed only fair that I should offer my services wherever and whenever they seemed most appropriate. As a result, I frequently found myself leading small groups of children in a whole range of classroom activities including word games, story-telling exercises,

practical mathematics tasks, and so on. A fortuitous off-shoot of such first-hand involvement with the children was that my presence became ever more familiar to them and the distorting effects of my being there appeared to be progressively reduced. Indeed, by the third day of data collection in all schools the children did appear to have become accustomed to me as “part of the furniture”. In a further effort to give as well as take, I have also offered to lead INSET sessions focussing upon my research in each school.

With continued regard to ethical considerations, it seemed necessary to ensure that my findings were fed back to the relevant people and all concerned have been given the opportunity to read my report. Following the data collection, I wrote once again to those involved (reception class teachers, headteachers, governors, parents/guardians and children) to thank them for their co-operation (see *Appendix A*).

### **Reflexivity**

My research strategy also attempted to pay continuous attention to the notion of “reflexivity” – the idea that research design and theory making are ongoing and transactional, the one constantly influencing and possibly adjusting the other (Ball, 1993). Perhaps the most conspicuous example of reflexivity throughout the entire research process can be seen in the fact that the project was originally entitled *Sociodramatic Play and Children’s Cognitive Development*. I did not have to progress very far with the reading for my *Literature Review* in order to realise that the cognitive aspects of children’s pretend play – along with the social – had already received relatively large amounts of attention and research. My practical field work, consequently, endeavoured to adopt a broader – and, hopefully, more comprehensive – approach than many I had encountered in theory. In direct connection with this important feature of reflexivity, my research was, necessarily, open-ended and any theorising I attempted had to be “grounded” in the material that was exposed (Measor and Woods, 1991, p. 60). Thus, as previously discussed, although I encountered little or no reference to the area of pretend play and humour during my reading, my



field work – from as early as my pilot project in 1999 – made apparent the potential significance of this domain for my resultant theorising.

Throughout my work, therefore, theory and practice were not viewed as oppositional to each other nor as being separate. Rather, in accordance with the Aristotelian notion of *praxis* (Carr, 1993), the two were seen as inextricably interlinked and constantly helping to refine and re-define one another.

### **Self-reflection**

Whether or not my chosen method of observation could be classed as “participant” or not is a moot point. Research is, of course, inevitably both a “distortion” of the world under observation (Lacey, 1993, p. 125) as well as a “construction” of a particular representation of that world (Eisner, 1993). The researcher can never be the anecdotal “fly-on-the-wall” (Open University, 1996, p. 96) and, consequently, “the claim that non-participant observation has been achieved in ethnographic fieldwork is suspect” (Ball, 1993, p. 34). Therefore, although I did not actively participate in the children’s sociodramatic play, my very presence in the classroom must, to an extent, be deemed to have been participatory and hence to have had a distorting effect on the data collected. However, I attempted to minimise the distortion thus caused through a number of strategies:

1. I made several visits to each school and its reception class before actually beginning formal observations and recordings in an attempt to become, as far as possible, “part of the furniture”. I also strove to be aware of being “tainted by the entry process” (Ball, 1993, p. 34) and of being seen by the pupils as another “teacher”, thereby potentially having a constraining effect on their play activities. I endeavoured to build warm and constructive relationships with the children in order that they might feel as comfortable as possible in my presence. Predictably perhaps, the more time I spent with the children, the less they seemed to regard me as a source of novelty and interest: for example, during the first periods of my involvement in their classroom they would frequently

turn round and look at me to assess my response to something the teacher had said or done. After a relatively short time, however, they appeared far less distracted by my presence. In like manner, I sought to develop professional and trusting relationships with the adults connected with the school – especially the class teachers, the E.C.O.'s and any adult helpers who worked in each reception class (Open University, 1996, p. 68).

2. I have not used any data collected during my first day of recording and observation (a strategy employed by Tizard and Hughes, 1991) as the “novelty factor” may well have had its greatest distorting effect during this session.
3. I recorded the children using a video camera discreetly placed a short distance away from the play areas and also “radio mics” (again, following the lead given by Tizard and Hughes, 1991) which were relatively unobtrusive and which allowed me to gain high-quality audio-recordings. I was fortunate in being able to borrow all recording equipment from my place of work. Like Tizard and Hughes (1991), I attached the mics and their power packs to the children using special “harnesses”. Inevitably, perhaps, the microphones and harnesses were initially a source of great fascination to the children. I gradually discovered, however, that the more transparent and explicit I was with the children about the equipment, then the more quickly they appeared to forget about it. Eventually, I adopted a regular procedure whereby, once both children had had their mics fitted, one would go to the far end of the room and whisper the other's name into the microphone. The second child, meanwhile, would “eavesdrop” this greeting some distance away using my headphones. This transparency appeared to assist the children in readily accepting the recording equipment and may, of course, have methodological implications for future research. Indeed, in Harfleur, two of the boys became so accustomed to their microphones that they started to utilise them in their play and attributed them with a fictitious function – they became the “walkie-talkies” which fire-fighters use to communicate with each other.

However, alongside these various attempts to make me an “insider” (at least from the pupils’ perspectives) I also endeavoured to retain and sustain the objectivity and neutrality of an “outsider” so that the complementary advantages of both approaches might be achieved (Bird, 1996, p. 30). I constantly attempted to make “anthropologically strange” the familiar setting and its taken-for-granted features (Measor and Woods, 1991, p. 70) by consciously “stepping outside” of the immediate situation during both observation and analysis, and endeavouring to assess what was happening as if “I were seeing it for the first time”.

### **Field Notes**

I also took field notes during my school visits although I was aware that these were, inevitably, not as comprehensive as I would ideally wish. The observer’s pen-and-paper cannot hope to reproduce anything like the vast amounts of recorded information provided by the video camera (Simco and Warin, 1997, p. 663). Moreover, I was aware of the fact that non-verbal forms of communication are difficult to record in writing and yet may have significance for data analysis (Measor and Woods, 1991, p. 73) – hence one of the reasons for using a video camera which I did not do during my pilot research in 1999. Illustrative examples of my Field Notes, along with the coding conventions employed, are included in *Appendix B*.

### **Transcription**

Perhaps the greatest potential problem associated with the recording of the children’s dialogue (apart from the manner of the recording which has already been discussed) is the onerous burden associated with transcription (Open University, 1996, p. 94). I was wary of initially collecting too much material as this could simply weigh me down with transcribing data and thereby prevent me from moving on to the critical analysis of the information. Nearly three hours of recording was made on the second and third days in Elsinor, half that amount (ninety minutes) was collected in Agincourt, and just over two hours and ten minutes in Harfleur, due to the

schools' differing time-tabling arrangements. This made a total of just over six and a half hours of recordings not including, of course, those made on the first day of data collection in each school. With the data collected in my first two schools, I transcribed in full all instances of the children engaging in social pretend play as I suspected that this may well reveal elements which I had previously not thoroughly considered. An example of such a revelation was the apparent "seriousness" and concomitant lack of humour which the children's sociodramatic play exhibited during my lengthy periods of transcription. By the time I came to transcribe the recorded data from my third and final school (Harfleur), however, my theorising had become far more finely tuned and I was, consequently, able to be rather more selective in choosing appropriate passages for transcription. Once again, this process of gradually greater selectivity in transcription might provide guidance for future research.

Co-ordinating the audio and video playbacks in a synchronised manner proved slightly problematical as the "counter-speeds" of the two pieces of recording equipment did not cohere. Consequently, on each occasion I would have to decide upon a particular moment from which to start both recorded playbacks simultaneously. The situation became even more awkward as the video playback was fractionally slower than the audio one. As a result, I would regularly have to pause the audio playback for a short moment whilst the video playback "caught up". Needless to say, the actual process of transcription entailed thousands of pressings of the respective pause buttons whilst I wrote out and examined the data in detail. Illustrative examples of my transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews, along with the coding conventions I employed, are included in *Appendix C* and of the children's sociodramatic play in *Appendix D*.

### **Research Diary**

The keeping of a research diary may not initially strike one as being a priority, but if methodological rigour were to be sustained then a continuous reflexive account of "the processes, problems, choices and errors which

describe the fieldwork upon which the substantive account is based” may well prove to have been indispensable (Ball, 1993, p.46). By regularly adding to this particular research instrument, revisiting various entries, reconsidering previous problems, and re-thinking former observations and questions, the research diary has, hopefully, assisted in achieving both reflectivity and objectivity, as well as, of course, ultimately providing further informative data (Open University, 1996, p. 94). An illustrative example of a page from my research diary has been included as *Appendix E*.

### **Post-Observation Semi-Structured Interviews/Triangulation**

It was also the intention that the semi-structured interviews with the class teachers and the relevant pupils would prove a successful means of triangulation – of using more than one method to explore and investigate certain areas – to help validate the data arising out of the observations and field notes (Open University, 1996, p. 97). These interviews would operate, in other words, as a form of “respondent validation” (Open University, 1996, p. 96). However, although the semi-structured interviews with the class teachers were lengthy and, arguably, yielded useful information such as the previously-mentioned comments concerning the gender-appropriateness of certain toys in Harfleur, the interviews with the children initially proved highly problematic and were, in my first two schools at least, of dubious value. In essence, the questions I had originally prepared seemed to make little sense to the children (even though they were refined for my second phase of data collection in the light of the experience gained at Elsinor) and reflection upon their play activities seemed to be a very alien concept to the children. For instance, a question such as, “Do you enjoy playing on your own or with friends?” would tend to be answered by, “With my friends.” But when I then asked why this was, the children seemed to founder for a suitable response. In the light of the recurring difficulty which the children appeared to encounter in understanding the point and the meaning of quite general, play-related inquiries, the questions were altered for the interviews in Harfleur to include only those which referred specifically to the children’s recorded play. Consequently, the children were

able to progress from reflection upon particular aspects of their play to more general contemplation about their activities. The questions also were adjusted to align much more closely with the five areas of development under investigation (see *Appendix C* for examples of both an earlier and also the final version of my question sheet). The upshot of these amendments was that the children in Harfleur seemed to experience much greater facility in discussing their pretend play and, arguably, much more useful data was thereby obtained. For instance, they were able to talk about features of the characters they had recently portrayed and their relationships with other characters in the scenario as well as discussing particular aspects of story-lines. Thus – as shall be discussed in the Language Development section of Chapter 4 – Alice in Harfleur was able, during the interview, to proffer the information that certain phrases she used to help comfort her “poorly baby sister” were, in fact, drawn directly from her grandmother’s linguistic repertoire. Similarly, and with specific regard to issues of triangulation, the children were able to confirm (or not) that my interpretation of what I had witnessed was, indeed, correct. For example, Rebecca and Kathy in Harfleur were not only able to substantiate my interpretation of the content of their play, but were even able to offer further clarification on one or two features of their *Mummy and Big Sister* episode:

- |     | <u>Mr Meakin</u>          | <u>Rebecca</u> | <u>Kathy</u> |
|-----|---------------------------|----------------|--------------|
| 1.  | Now let me get this right |                |              |
| 2.  | Kathy was the mum? Is     |                |              |
| 3.  | that right? And Rebecca   |                |              |
| 4.  | was . . .                 |                |              |
| 5.  | big sister.               |                |              |
| 6.  | The sister. Did you have  |                |              |
| 7.  | other sisters in the play |                |              |
| 8.  | then?                     |                |              |
| 9.  | No. There’s only          |                |              |
| 10. | sisters over there        |                |              |
| 11. | [ <i>Pointing to</i>      |                |              |

12.       *where their*  
13.       *imaginary*  
14.       *“house” had*  
15.       *been]*  
16.       We’ve only got  
17.       one boy and two  
18.       girls.  
19.   But Rebecca you were  
20.   the oldest of the children  
21.   were you?  
22.       [Nods head]  
23.   How old were you?  
24.       Five.  
25.   Five. Same as you.  
26.       That’s my proper  
27.       age.  
28.   And what age were you  
29.   in the play?  
30.       Erm. Six.  
31.   Six? Is that right,  
32.   Rebecca?  
33.       Yes.  
34.   And was nana ill?  
35.       Yes.  
36.   Did you go and visit  
37.   nana?  
38.       Yes.  
39.       Yes.  
40.   Oh and took her some  
41.   flowers?  
42.       These flowers.  
43.   Where was nana?  
44.       At hospital.

45. And where was the
46. hospital? Over here
47. was it?
48. No.

From these specific observations, the children then seemed able to make more general comments about their play, including favourite characters, favourite playmates, play at home and in the playground, and so on. For instance – as shall be detailed in the Moral Development section of Chapter 4 – Paulo and Jeff were able to discuss their preference for portraying “goodies” rather than “baddies”. Likewise, in the *Mummy and Big Sister* episode just referred to, Kathy could detail something about the pleasure gained from caring for a poorly sister:

- |                                 |                   |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| <u>Mr Meakin</u>                | <u>Kathy</u>      |
| 1. Kathy, did you enjoy looking |                   |
| 2. after big sister?            |                   |
| 3. Yes.                         |                   |
| 4. Why did you enjoy that?      |                   |
| 5. Because we had dinner.       |                   |
| 6. And I cooked for her.        |                   |
| 7. And did she eat it all up?   |                   |
| 8.                              | Yes. And I helped |
| 9. to make her better.          |                   |

This progression in my refined interviewing structure from the specific to the more general is diametrically at odds with that advocated by Wilson and Powell (2001). When interviewing children, they recommend a “funnel” approach whereby the interviewer begins with the most open-ended questions and then progresses to the more specific (p. 45). The discrepancy in the advice given by Wilson and Powell and that which I found to be most effective may be because Wilson and Powell are offering their advice to



people such as counsellors, lawyers, the police and social workers who, clearly, have very different concerns to mine when interviewing children.

With regard to the physical circumstances of these interviews, I initially endeavoured to carry them out “on the hoof”, as it were, grabbing some time with the children before taking off their radio mics. In Harfleur, however, I provided more time and space for the interviews, and supplied a suitably conducive environment for discussion, including placing my own eye-level at the same height as theirs. I was able to sit the children and myself on small chairs, whilst continuing to record them, and discuss their play with them without interruption from adults or other children. As a result, the environment for the interviews in Harfleur conformed precisely to that proposed by Wilson and Powell (2001, p. 29). Once again, there may be lessons here for future research.

### **Data Analysis**

As mentioned previously, the compartmentalising of my work into five separate, but overlapping, areas of development has informed not only the structuring of my *Literature Review* but also the format of much of my data collection and analysis. For example, although the recording equipment was simply “left running” whilst the children played together (or not), my selection and investigation of the data was increasingly influenced by the aforementioned five developmental areas. As my analysis progressed from school to school, I became more and more likely to “home in” on those instances where sociodramatic play and one of the developmental areas in question appeared to be manifesting themselves. However, this process of increasing selectivity in my data analysis must not be held to imply, when a passage was chosen for its utility in exploring one of the five developmental domains, that other, complementary aspects of development were not also taking place. Take, for instance, the incident of Alice reading books to Zelda, her “poorly baby sister” - of which an extract from my Transcription Notes is provided in *Appendix D*, HPS, page 4. This passage, as shall be discussed in detail in section 2 of the next chapter, was primarily chosen for

detailed analysis and scrutiny because of the insights it provided into Alice's burgeoning linguistic abilities, especially with regard to literary genres. However, and again as discussed in section 2 of Chapter 4, this must not be thought of as implying that other areas of development – such as the emotional, interpersonal and moral – were not also concurrently being reinforced and, arguably, furthered. The selection of certain passages of my data for greater analysis, in other words, was based principally on those passages' ability to exemplify points arising out of the literature or, and increasingly so, because they were capable of extending the discussion concerning sociodramatic play and a particular area of development even further. To repeat myself, though, this must not be held to imply that particular types of development were progressing in isolation from others. Child development, of course, is a far too complex and multi-faceted field to allow the researcher such neat and tidy categorisations. Similarly – and again as already touched upon – my questioning in the semi-structured interviews with teachers and children alike became increasingly focussed upon the possible interconnections between social pretend play and the said five areas of development, especially as exhibited in the instances of sociodramatic play I had witnessed in the respective schools. This brief extract from my interview with the teachers in Harfleur displays them – and me – making connections between pretend play and social learning, problem solving and emotional development:

Mr Meakin

Ms. Britten

Ms. Swift

1. Zelda said she knows it's
2. wrong to laugh *at* people.
3. Oh, our PSHE
4. is coming through.
5. That's nice.
6. So what's the point of this
7. kind of activity?
8. The social behaviour.
9. And to work out

10. situations. You  
11. know you can  
12. make it out into  
13. different things  
14. if a child's going  
15. through  
16. something like  
17. going into hospital  
18. or something.  
19. And you get children  
20. coming in who are  
21. quiet as well and  
22. become totally  
23. different.  
24. Right, so again that  
25. would be social benefits  
26. Social yeah  
27. whereas, Ms. Swift, you  
28. also see kind of therapeutic  
29. potential as well?  
30. Yes. I mean you  
31. can direct it in  
32. whatever  
33. direction you  
34. want it to go.  
35. Yes, I was saying to Ms.  
36. Britten yesterday they  
37. actually dealt with the  
38. subject of mum dying.

Of course, this approach may be deemed to be unadvisedly “positivist” in nature. It may be argued that my chosen five areas were artificially expelling interest in and analysis of other important issues connected with

sociodramatic play. However, it must again be emphasised that the five areas of development themselves were not simply the result of my reading of the literature. The categories had ultimately become almost “self-selecting” as a result of being grounded in the data analysis I had conducted during my pilot research and the earlier stages of my study as well as being a consequence of the reading I had undertaken. Importantly, further refinement also occurred to the actual composition of the categories as my study progressed – for example, the area which had been earlier labelled Identity Construction/Emotional Development came eventually to include Moral Development as well. The five categories finally utilised, then, and which increasingly informed my data collection and data analysis as well as my ongoing theory making, were a direct consequence of both my field work and the literature. There was a constant moving back and forth between theory construction, data collection and analysis and the process of explanation. Ultimately, these various componential features of my research were “developed [quasi-]simultaneously in a dialectical process” (Mason, 1996, p. 141). It does not seem unreasonable, then, that the five areas of development finally used to structure my *Literature Review* should also help provide the framework for my data analysis and reporting.

### **Validity**

Mention has already been made of triangulation as a means of seeking to ensure the validity of this research, but there are further issues surrounding the concept of validity which need to be discussed. It may be persuasively claimed that, in seeking to triangulate one’s data, one is unwisely looking for confirmation of one’s findings rather than alternative viewpoints. The researcher, in other words, is seeking consensus as opposed to challenge (Simco and Warin, 1997). In order to guard against this, Simco and Warin propose a set of criteria which I have endeavoured to adhere to in my data analysis. In the first place, I have attempted to produce, as far as possible, “full” descriptions of the events taking place. Whilst these could never hope to record every last detail, by constantly questioning and challenging the descriptions I have produced it is hoped that ever more adequate

redescriptions have been achieved. The above section entitled Post-Observation Semi-Structured Interviews/Triangulation, for instance, has been revised and expanded upon on several occasions throughout my research activity in an attempt to give the reader increasingly useful insight and information. Likewise, I have endeavoured to attain transparency in my research through explicit communication of every stage of the research methodology. Notions of reflexivity (that is, reciprocity between the development of the literature review and the development of the empirical study) and self-reflection (the capacity and will to situate oneself within the research process) have been constantly borne in mind. I have, that is, continuously striven to place myself conspicuously within my field work and its reporting. Finally, conflicting interpretations have been positively striven for – as well as the perspectives of the pupils and class teachers already referred to, my tutor-supervisor has also viewed the recordings and the earlier drafts of this report in order to produce challenges to my interpretations and analyses. On numerous occasions – through phone-calls, emails and face-to-face exchanges – she has prompted me to consider alternative viewpoints and to provide more detailed, more rigorous observations and considerations. All of these above strategies, then, have been utilised in a concerted attempt to make my research as valid and as reliable as possible; to try and ensure, in Mason's words, that my study is "thorough, careful, honest and accurate" (1996, p. 146).

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS/DISCUSSION

#### Frequency of Sociodramatic Play

Perhaps because I had been reasonably assiduous in arriving at an acceptable – and operationisable – definition of sociodramatic play (namely, play in which two or more people participate in symbolic activity simultaneously, assuming complementary roles and co-operating together in developing a single scenario), I experienced little difficulty in determining whether the play which I observed could be categorised as sociodramatic (or not). As has already been detailed, the periods of activity observed and recorded during my time in the three schools which conformed to my definition of sociodramatic play can be classified as follows:

Agincourt Primary School:

- Angie, Mary and Craig plus, very intermittently, Jack playing at *Bonfire Night and Frightened Doggy*.

(Less than three minutes of sociodramatic play out of over two hours of recording).

Elsinor Primary School:

- Edward and Colin playing at *School*.
- Andrea and Lizzy playing at *School* and sporadically joined by Edward and Colin.
- Lizzy and Colin playing at *Parents*.

(Twenty-four minutes of sociodramatic play out of nearly four hours of recording).

Harfleur Primary School:

- Alice and Zelda playing at *Poorly Baby Sister*.
- Jock and Larry playing at *Pizzas and Fires*.
- Jock and Jim playing at *Eating, Fire-fighting and Shopping*.
- Rebecca and Kathy playing at *Mummy and Big Sister*.

(Two hours and nine minutes of sociodramatic play out of approximately two hours and fifteen minutes of recording).

In Agincourt, when the children were not involved in sociodramatic play (as was the case for the vast majority of the time) but remained in the restaurant corner, they tended to continue to be involved in pretend play but of a solitary nature. The possible significances of this will be discussed later. In Elsinor, when the children were not playing sociodramatically together, they were inclined to wander around the classroom (the various play areas were dotted around the room, remember), and join in other activities such as playing with Duplo or in the water tray. In Harfleur, of course, the observed children were involved almost constantly in sociodramatic play throughout the recording.

At first sight, it may appear that the frequency of sociodramatic play in the sessions which I observed might be capable of being categorised essentially along lines of gender. What is more, it might also appear possible to classify the different sociodramatic activities using Thyssen's (2003) thematic distinctions. In brief, he sees social pretend play as tending to fall into one of two general topical areas:

1. Being an active person in possession of strength and able to accomplish acts that earn respect.
2. Human relations: to give and receive love and care.

(2003, p. 605)

The play episodes which I observed, from the very titles alone which I have attributed to them, may be deemed to fit neatly into one or other of these categories. Moreover, as mentioned above, they may also be thought of as being distinguished along essentially issues of gender. The play of all the girls (admittedly joined at times by some of the boys) might be thought of as adhering to Thyssen's second category concerning loving and caring: Angie, Mary, Andrea, Lizzy, Alice, Zelda, Rebecca and Kathy were all involved in kinds of play where parents, teachers or elder siblings were protecting and nurturing children, babies, grandparents, pets, pupils or younger siblings. Edward and Colin's *School* play might also be deemed to

fall into this category but, as shall be discussed later, Edward's teacher was extremely autocratic and dictatorial and, indeed, anything but loving and caring. In like fashion, the boys' sociodramatic play might typically be thought of as conforming to Thyssen's first category concerning strong characters earning respect. The "power" of Edward's teacher has already been referred to but, similarly, the fire-fighters of Jock, Larry and Jim and, very briefly, the father-figure of Jack might all be considered to be "manly" characterisations bravely using their strength and abilities in activities designed to gain respect. However, closer inspection of my data might well help to reveal that such distinctions made along gender differences and utilising Thyssen's thematic categories are in danger of over-simplifying reality, leading to mistaken conclusions regarding boys and girls. For example, and again as will be discussed later, Andrea's teacher in Elsinor could certainly not be categorised as loving and caring but endeavoured to be every bit as autocratic as Edward's teacher in the same school.

Furthermore, although many of the girls were involved in giving and receiving love and affection, this frequently also entailed issues of strength and the capacity to earn respect. For instance, in Harfleur it was precisely because Alice and Rebecca were strong, fit and healthy that they were able to care for their less-than-well sibling and child respectively and thereby generate reciprocal love and respect. In like manner, the boys' sociodramatic play, as well as entailing notions of strength and prestige, also frequently involved concepts of loving and caring. Both pairs of fire-fighters in Harfleur, for example, were concerned not only with putting out fires and protecting the general populace, but also with cooking and caring for one another. Similarly, Colin's father in Elsinor was every bit as concerned and gentle with their baby as was Lizzy's mother. Nor did this similarity between the boys' and girls' play extend only to the capacity to provide nurturing attention: Craig's dog in Agincourt and two of the fire-fighters in Harfleur were just as capable of appreciatively receiving care and protection as were Zelda's sister and Kathy's daughter. To conclude this brief endeavour to categorise my recorded passages of sociodramatic play, then, it may be stated that any attempt to shoe-horn the activities into pre-



determined classifications may well result in an over-simplification of reality leading to misleading generalisations about – in this particular instance – sociodramatic play and gender.

### **1. Sociodramatic Play and Cognitive Development**

As discussed above, it may be persuasively argued that play is inherently connected to both linguistic and symbolic behaviour in humans and that, ultimately, it helps facilitate higher, more abstract ways of thinking (Bruner, Jolly and Sylva, 1976, p. 21). As Vygotsky comments, “From the point of view of development, creating an imaginary situation can be regarded as a means of developing abstract thought” (1978, p. 103). Thus play may be claimed to assist children in their progression from concrete, tangible activity to more conceptual, disembedded ways of thinking. Ms. Parr, the reception class teacher at Elsinor, herself made this observation when I interviewed her:

It’s all done through play and talk really. . . . Unless they’ve got it in the concrete and they can see it and use it, it’s not going to go in here [pointing to her head].

Essentially, of course, Ms. Parr is delineating a social-constructivist view of learning here with progress being regarded as advancing from the exterior to the interior “worlds”. Arguably, she is also thereby providing further justification for the adoption of this paradigm of development throughout this work. To achieve the kind of successful social pretend play Ms. Parr is referring to, though, co-ordination and agreement are necessary in both the real and the fictional “worlds”. This co-operation is negotiated at two levels – the communicative and the metacommunicative (Goncu, 1998, p. 121). Giffin (1984) highlights the distinction between these two forms of communication by citing pertinent examples. Direct, explicit communication may occur outside of the play-frame (e.g. “Let’s pretend we’re monsters”) or within the play-frame (“I’m mummy”). As play progresses and as play becomes more mature, however, players tend to

utilise more indirect, implicit forms of managing the fiction and negotiate with one another on the metacommunicative level about the play's content – what theme or script is to be played, and where and how the theme is to be realised (Bretherton, 1984, p. 25; Garvey, 1990, p. 135). Mary in the *Bonfire Night and Frightened Doggy* episode in Agincourt School exhibited both forms of communication within seconds of one another. “Is it bonfire night?” she asked the recalcitrant Jack from within the play-frame in order to try and involve him in the pretence and implicitly to progress the scenario (i.e. an instance of metacommunication). When Jack responded with an abrupt, “No”, Mary then immediately stepped out of the play-frame and communicated directly with Jack: “No, pretend it is.”

These two forms of communication could be observed on numerous occasions during the children's sociodramatic play in Elsinor and Harfleur. Direct communication frequently involved the giving of instructions, either “as oneself” and outside of the play-frame (such as, “Pretend we've got to do our work” or, “Pretend this hurts”) or “in character” and from within the play-frame (for instance, “Do your writing then” or, “Now then can you draw this?”). Metacommunication could often be observed when a new plot ingredient was being suggested to a play-mate (such as, “I want Daddy get the doctor”) or when names were used to indicate who was playing which character (“Miss Parr em can I do my work now?”). Both of these metacommunicative examples may be held to denote a surprising sophistication of cognitive process. In the first instance, when Lizzy says in Colin's hearing during their *Parents* episode, “I want Daddy get a doctor,” she is implicitly conveying at least two suggestions to Colin:

1. I want you to continue playing the role of the father (there had previously been no direct reference to this).
2. I would like to instigate a plot development along the lines of, “The baby is ill and a doctor must be found”.

In the second example, when Lizzy says to Andrea during their *School* play, “Miss Parr em can I do my work now,” again a number of points are being metacommunicated:

1. Andrea, I wish you to continue to be the teacher.
2. I will resume being the compliant pupil.
3. Can we all continue properly with the pretence of playing school?

What we are witnessing in these instances, then, is not the kind of metacommunicative activity described by Bateson (cited by Goncu, 1998, p. 124) which simply conveys the message “This is play and not reality”. Indeed, many animals have been noted as utilising such metacommunication through purely physical means, indicating to their fellows that what follows is playful rather than real: such instances include the head jerks of the black-tailed deer, the bow or foreleg half-crouch of the dog and the open-mouth face of rhesus monkeys (White, 1977, p. 17). The metacommunication observed in the example of Lizzy and Andrea above, however, is of a more advanced form (noted by Goncu, 1998, p. 125) and is linguistic rather than physical in character. Lizzy is metacommunicating with Andrea, unlike the deer, dogs and monkeys referred to, in a manner which is detached from the actual action itself. Could the ability to communicate implied rather than overt meanings, via language, then, be evidence of progression towards more sophisticated ways of thinking and socially/linguistically interacting? Could the progression from the concrete world of enactment to the more esoteric world of implicit linguistic communication in play be held to be symptomatic of a higher, more abstract manner of cognitive operation? Rosenblatt, for example, notes that, “Developments in play go hand in hand with other cognitive abilities” (1977, p. 39). Yet again, linguistic, social and cognitive development would appear to be concurrent and complementary and their resultant effects to be manifested in sociodramatic play.

Interestingly, during my data accumulation in Elsinor Primary School I encountered no instances of objects being used as “pivots” during play

where “the meaning of the action” was severed from “the real action” (Vygotsky, 1976, p. 548). Vygotsky cites the example of a long stick being used as a horse in play but I observed no such degree of quasi-symbolic activity in that school. Objects were, needless to say, of the utmost importance in stimulating and directing pretend play in all three schools that I visited but they were only ever used in Elsinor in an almost completely literal manner – thus, party hats and a pretend cake prompted a *Party* scenario; books, pencils, crayons, chalk and a blackboard gave rise to *School* play; dolls and bedding promoted *Parents* play; and so on. To my knowledge, however, no “props” were ever used in Elsinor in an entirely representational manner quite removed from their actual functioning. In Agincourt Primary School, on the other hand, the dressing-up clothes in the washing machine were transformed into the bedding materials for the frightened dog – they were being used, in other words, in a non-literal manner. Arguably, this transformation of an object’s functioning within play is evidence of a greater degree of cognitive sophistication (Smith, 1977, p. 140). Garvey notes that “older children” are more able to use objects in an “ideational” rather than “material” manner during their pretend play (1990, p. 136). As will be discussed below, the play of the children in Agincourt was arguably significantly less socially mature than those in Elsinor; nonetheless, might it conceivably have been more cognitively developed?

Perhaps the most conspicuous example of an object being used in a non-literal manner which I encountered during all phases of my data collection, however, occurred during Jock and Larry’s *Pizzas and Fires* scenario in Harfleur (see *Appendix B*, HPS, p. 5). The play had been proceeding in a relatively calm and pleasurable manner but one sensed that the boys desired more excitement in their play – Jock preparing and cooking pizzas for Larry did not really appear to enthuse either participant and, indeed, the scenario continued for eight minutes before the boys even seemed to be operating with genuine mutuality and co-ordination. A metacommunicative prompt from Larry to spice up the proceedings (“I’m from Pluto and I’ve come down to Earth”) seemed to go unheeded by Jock. It was not until eighteen

minutes had passed that Jock took the two play vacuum cleaners which were present in the home corner and – in an entirely implicit, referential manner – transmogrified them into, of all things, fire engines:

Jock

[taking the vacuum cleaners]

1. We've got to put the fire out today
2. [passes a cleaner to Larry] You have that one
3. O.K. let's go and put the fire out

[they run off with the vacuum cleaners]

From this point onwards, the play became far more animated and energised and the boys were even able to link this new plot development into their preceding play – it was the burning pizza which had caused the initial fire. As Jock explained to me in the subsequent interview: “The pizza was really warm and the fire started to come out.” Similarly, at the start of Jock and Jim's play on the following day, Jock appeared to have little difficulty in resuming the cleaners' symbolic, secondary function as fire engines, nor did Jim experience any problem in accepting this:

Jock

1. [to Jim] Let's get the Hoovers
2. Let's put a fire out
3. [both boys run off with the “Hoovers” to put out a fire]

As we have previously noted, Vygotsky (1978) has observed that only certain props can be transformed and utilised in fantasy play in certain ways – thus, a long stick can be a pretend horse but a postcard cannot (p. 98). What was it, then, that allowed Jock, Jeff and Jim so readily to transform two vacuum cleaners into two fire engines? Not surprisingly, perhaps, it was the “hose” which the cleaners contained. This could readily be “substituted” for the hose of a fire engine and the fact that the cleaners had wheels and could be pushed around at high speeds presumably assisted in their

transformation. Indeed, in the interview which followed the *Pizzas and Fires* play, Jock validated this interpretation and explained how the cleaners had to be used as fire engines because the hoses, significantly, on the “real” fire engines had previously broken:

Mr Meakin

Jock

1. Whose idea was it to
2. use the Hoovers as the
3. fire engines?
4. Because our fire engine
5. broke and there was no
6. more fire engines
7. So you used that did
8. you?
9. Yeah
10. And what did you use
11. the hose on the
12. Hoover for?
13. Because the hose because
14. the hose on the fire engine
15. we tried them hoses on the
16. fire engines but they didn't
17. work so we used these
18. Hoovers and we tried 'em
19. on there and then they worked

One could hardly wish, then, for a more transparent realisation of Vygotsky's (1978) description of the way in which a prop in the “real” world can be attributed with a secondary, symbolic meaning (the objects are “really” cleaners and not fire engines) and thereby operate as a pivot into the world of enacted fantasy and enacted symbolisation. Surely this is a convincing instance of how sociodramatic play can function as an intermediary stage between concrete, immediate operations in the “real”

world (the props are cleaners in actuality) and abstract, “inner”, decontextualised thought (the props are used as fire-engines). Or, in social constructivist terms as discussed in the *Literature Review*, are we not witnessing here Jock, Jim and Larry accruing active understandings in the external, interpersonal world which are leading ultimately to the development of internalised, conceptual thinking (Light and Perret-Clermont, 1991)?

Furthermore, is this example of “object transformation” additional evidence of the kind of inferential, implicit, quite sophisticated metacommunication already discussed in this sub-section? As previously stated, on neither occasion when the vacuum cleaners became fire engines did the transformation have to be explicitly explained to the play partner. These findings would appear to contradict Umek and Musek’s (2001) observation that:

. . . the use of various objects have different functions in play and in real life, therefore the child – player – must define these symbolic transformations verbally, so that they have a clear (recognisable) meaning and are comprehensible to his or her playmates.  
(2001, p. 56)

My data would seem to suggest otherwise (the “symbolic transformations” most definitely did not have to be defined verbally) – and, arguably, this finding gives further support to the claims made earlier about the level of cognitive advancement being displayed when meanings are conveyed in such an indirect, implicit manner.

What was also noticeable about the influence of props, whether used in an essentially literal way or otherwise, was not simply their utility in prompting particular types of play, but also their essential ability to form a shared focus during social pretend play. This mutually-accepted nexus is, of course, an

essential prerequisite for any form of collective social engagement (Goncu, 1998, p. 118) and the objects used during the sociodramatic play which I observed were particularly facilitative of this kind of co-operative activity. The presence of the “teacher’s stamps” when Edward and Colin were playing at *School* in Elsinor, for instance, was instrumental in giving them a shared focus as well as helping to determine the apportioning of character roles (Edward as the teacher and Colin as the pupil) and the derivation of the story-line (Colin is to strive for stamp marks on his work and Edward will adjudicate its worthiness). In a comparable manner, it was the *inability* to agree on a shared focus which impeded the progress of Andrea and Lizzy’s play in Elsinor until a third object provided the solution: a letter-picture was initially proposed by Andrea as the shared focus, whilst Lizzy clearly opted for pencils; finally, it was the joint utilisation of a blackboard which operated as the springboard for their pretend play. Again, as will be further discussed below, the inability – or, rather, often the refusal – to agree a shared focus frequently meant the collapse of any attempted joint pretence in Agincourt. A solitary example might suffice for now – Craig approached “Shane” with a pot full of food as the proposed shared focus for their play. Shane responded by simply emptying the food all over the floor. Needless to say, no pretend play ensued from this.

Similarly, the adoption of mutually-recognised schemata – set routines from day-to-day activities – were also of great assistance in providing focus and structure to the children’s play in both Elsinor and Harfleur. As already discussed in the *Literature Review* chapter, it is schemata or “narratives” which arguably help shape and clarify our view of the world (Bruner, 1989, p. 46; Open University, 1994, p. 90) and in a broadly similar manner these “scripts” appeared to give coherence and combined understanding to the children’s pretend play. Thus, as already referred to, the procedure adopted from “real” class activity of a pupil trying to produce work of a sufficiently high standard to merit award stamps and then the teacher deciding whether or not this has been attained is the daily schema which provided the story-line for Edward and Colin’s *School* play episode. Interestingly, Colin and



Lizzy utilised separate, but related, narratives in their *Parents* play so that the pretence might continue without necessitating too great a degree of co-operation (or contact?) between the boy and the girl. Thus, although both children were enacting the roles of caring parents at their children's bedtime, Colin utilised the (presumably more "masculine") script of reading a story to the baby, while Lizzy pursued the plot-line (presumably more "feminine") of putting baby to bed. Again, though, it was the transference to a fictional context of readily-identifiable "real" set routines and procedures which appeared to structure the children's play and allowed each one of them little difficulty in understanding what was occurring. Indeed, the utilisation of such schemata is, arguably, evidence itself of progress towards more abstract, disembedded ways of thinking and operating. For the ability to extract from certain set social routines, general "rules" of appropriate shape, structure, progress and conduct and then to apply these in new and various contexts suggests, arguably, the beginnings of conceptual, decontextualised operation (Garvey, 1976, p. 577). Not only is sociodramatic play itself, and the props utilised therein, then, persuasive evidence of fantasy play's utility in the progress towards greater conceptual, hypothetical thinking, so too are the narratives or schemata which also are part and parcel of this kind of play.

The capacity to think fluently, inventively, experimentally and effectively (that is, componential features of what were earlier discussed as constituting "creativity") was constantly manifested in the children's sociodramatic play which I observed. Examples of this might include, for instance, Colin deciding not simply to read to his "baby" to help her sleep but also to assist the process by singing when the book suggested an appropriate song: "Postman Pat Postman Pat ( ) black and white cat . . .". Another instance of ideational fluency/problem solving might be when Andrea, realising she has no pupils to form her class, proposed that the solitary Lizzy is used to represent the entire group: "You're the little children so you have to sit down". I do not think, incidentally, that this was merely a grammatical error – for one reason, an identical instance of a child using another individual to

“represent” a whole class was encountered during my pilot research in 1999. Both these instances of single people being “transformed” into many due to the exigencies of particular plot-lines, then, might be held to be clear illustrations of the children’s creativity during sociodramatic play – of free association and fluidity of thinking being utilised to solve specific problems (Russ, 2003, p. 292).

But perhaps the most striking instances of creative solutions being found to resolve existing difficulties – along with the aforementioned “vacuum-cleaner-fire-engines” – were displayed in the children’s use of the “invisible”. Although, as noted above, no objects were ever used in a completely non-literal manner within Elsinor, there were two instances recorded there when, presumably because of the absence of anything approximating to what was actually needed, the required dramatic ingredients were “invented from nothing” by the children and were, consequently, invisible to the outside observer. Smith (1988) regards the use of such imaginary objects as indicative of a certain level of cognitive advancement which is possible in three and four year olds but which is more common in middle childhood. He notes how three and four year olds, when asked to pretend to comb their hair or brush their teeth, will use a substitute body part such as a finger; most six to eight year olds, on the other hand, will imagine the comb or toothbrush in their hand (1988, p. 186).

The first observed instance of such “invisible” object substitution in Elsinor involved Andrea’s entrance to the *Party*. It was dramatically expedient for Andrea to be “outside” of “Jess’s house” as she needed to make a grand entrance (accompanied by song and the “birthday cake”) into the party. As there was no tangible partition, therefore, Andrea appeared to have little difficulty in “miming” the door and thus highlighting her entrance into the house’s “interior”. No such door existed in actuality, of course, but Andrea’s performance of “turning the door knob” and “opening the door” left no doubt as to the intention of her actions. Similarly, a point was reached during Andrea and Lizzy’s playing at *School* where Lizzy no longer

wished to be the compliant pupil but appeared to want to take on a more prestigious adult role. Again, Lizzy seemed to have no problem whatsoever in compensating for her lack of pupils by creating an invisible boy. The tape shows her writing on the blackboard (“You see you see I gotta write something”), adopting an autocratic teacherly role and saying about the “non-existent” child, “Has to do something. He has to do that and and a ‘b’”. (Just as fascinating is the fact that, presumably to enhance her new-found status, Lizzy actually delivers this directive in a pseudo-American accent.) A comparable instance of the utilisation of the purely imaginary occurred in Harfleur during the *Mummy and Big Sister* play when Rebecca presented Kathy with an invisible “dead flower”. Rebecca stated that she had heard about the flower dying “on the news” and then proceeded to enact presenting the non-existent flower to her “mother” as a token of love and affection. The fact that Andrea was able to mime a door opening and also that Rebecca was able to conjure up a dead flower, each with such apparent facility, suggests to me that neither child was simply producing already-learned mimeographic routines; rather, they were creatively resorting to the utilisation of the invisible as no suitable “pivots” – to use Vygotsky’s terminology – were present to hand.

What is especially remarkable about the various instances of creative thinking in the children’s play is the apparent ease with which they resolve problems – the children are, after all, playing and playing is intrinsically “good fun”. As Bax comments, “. . . children and animals play because they enjoy playing, and therein lies their freedom” (1977, p. 2). A similar observation, already referred to, is made by Sylva, Bruner and Genova: “What was particularly striking was their capacity to resist frustration and ‘giving up’. They were playing” (cited in Bruner, Jolly and Sylva, 1976, p. 16). It is perhaps worth restating at this point that, even as an adult, one is arguably able to think most creatively and productively when one is enjoying what one is doing and feeling relaxed and confident. Conversely, it is very difficult to produce creative solutions to problems if one is under threat, over-pressurised and/or unhappy (Broadhead, 2003). As mentioned

in the *Literature Review*, it is very difficult for playfulness and coercion to co-exist. Again, then, the cognitive and affective domains are seen as operating transactionally and, ultimately, inseparably.

In summarising this section, it must needs be restated that my data repeatedly appeared to lend weight to the notion that, in social constructivist terms, children's sociodramatic play affords opportunities for abstract, conceptual areas of understanding to be enacted and explored in the exterior, tangible world en route to their becoming internalised as higher-order thinking. Such instances include the adept use of metacommunication – both inside and outside the play-frame – in order to transmit implied rather than overt meanings; the creative and ideationally-fluent use of props – in both more and less literal fashions – as “pivots” into the world of imagination-in-action; and the transference and adaptation of mutually-recognised schemata from “real” life into the world of the children's fictional play. My data certainly seemed to lend weight to the arguments of Vygotsky (1978), and many others since, concerning the utility of sociodramatic play to cognitive development.

## **2. Sociodramatic Play and Language Development**

As previously observed, it may be argued that, prior to children becoming conscious of the constituent features and structures of language, “playing” with language by decimating it, reconstituting it, repeating sounds and “talking funny” (Garvey, 1990, pp. 70-1) is an important aid to their growing understanding of how language operates and also to the increasing enjoyment that is to be gained from the wilful manipulation of linguistic features (Garvey, 1977). Stern and Stern (1928), for instance, mention children's predilection for rhythm, rhyme and alliteration, while Scupin and Scupin (1907) discuss associations based on recurring sounds (both cited in Weir, 1976, p. 610). Thus, whilst young children have no “meta-language” to enable them to analyse and discuss aspects of language itself, their spontaneous play does enable them to carry out a whole range of linguistic explorations, quite outside of the usual conventions concerning “normal”

language use (Garvey, 1977, p. 82). As Weir observes (in a linguistically playful manner): “There is linguistic sense in the child’s nonsense” (1976, p. 618). Language may not be analysed in the abstract at this stage of development, but its componential aspects can be actively engaged with during play. Indeed, just as we have seen above (in the section in Chapter 2 on Humour/Pleasure) how play can facilitate both the reinforcement and the development of rules in games such as marbles and peekaboo, so, too, can play provide opportunities for the child to experiment with the rules governing language use. Weir, again, is enlightening on this point: “At times we have the feeling of listening in on a foreign language lesson with extensive pattern practice” (1976, pp. 611-2).

However, it is interesting to note that during my field work, although I regularly encountered the “playing with language” referred to, it did not tend to occur during the passages of sociodramatic play (exceptions to this were when Alice in Harfleur was “reading” from a book to her “poorly baby sister”). As with my forthcoming observations on the incompatibility of sociodramatic play and humour, it may also be the case that the rule breaking which occurs when language is de- and re-constructed is anathema to the rule observance essential to sociodramatic play. When sustaining a particular character in a particular situation in play, in other words, one presumably needs consistently to adhere to language appropriate to that character in that situation rather than endeavour for linguistic novelty. In this brief extract from Rebecca and Kathy’s *Mummy and Big Sister* play in Harfleur, for example, the two girls not only observe and make explicit the “rules” of appropriate maternal and elder sibling behaviour (as noted by Vygotsky [1978]), they also adhere to apposite linguistic “rules” concerning the speech of mothers and their older children during co-operative domestic activity:

Rebecca

Kathy

1. No more books now I’m not
2. buying anymore for you

3. No because we've got enough books
4. Mum?
5. What?
6. I need to go to school
7. O.K. if you want. Sister, I'm
8. just making the dinner O.K.
9. O.K. for you I'll come and
10. fetch you when I've had dinner.
11. Sister, I'll come and fetch you
12. when I've done when I've
13. done dinner

Indeed, playing with language and striving for humorous effect (as noted earlier) can often be part and parcel of the same thing – and both, I would argue, are intrinsically concerned with the breaking of rules. In the extract from my pilot research in 1999 cited below in the section on Sociodramatic Play and Humour/Pleasure, it is perhaps significant that both boys play with and decimate language and linguistic rules precisely when they are also concurrently striving for humorous effect and threatening the continuance of successful shared pretence: their laughter and joking when feeding the “cat” inedible items is accompanied by linguistic irregularities such as, “Chicken chicky chick,” and, “Bishy bishy biscuits.” One further example might help to clarify my position here. Note the following exchange between “Paulo” and “Jeff” in Harfleur:

- |    | <u>Paulo</u>           | <u>Jeff</u> |
|----|------------------------|-------------|
| 1. | What's his name again? |             |
| 2. | Mr. Meakin             |             |
| 3. | Mr. Meakin             |             |
| 4. | Mr. Meessey            |             |
| 5. | Mr. Mess               |             |
| 6. | Mr. Meakin             |             |

[Laughter]

Paulo's playful experiments with constituent features of my surname may well be regarded as evidence of the kind of linguistic exploration cited above (as well as, perhaps, being indicative of Paulo being playfully cheeky with the name of the man he knew to be eavesdropping his conversation on a set of headphones). Having confirmed what my name actually is, Paulo alters it but keeps the same initial sound and the same number of syllables: "Mr. Meessey". Alliteration and syllabic structure might thus be held to be under experimentation. He then alters the surname again, still retaining the initial "m" and the medial "s" sounds, but this time reducing the number of syllables to one – all with a linguistically humorous outcome: "Mr. Mess". Alliteration and syllabic structure are not the only aspects of language brought into play (literally) this time, assonance is also utilised: "Meess" becomes "Mess". Paulo finally reverts to my proper name. In this brief instance, then, Paulo is seen to be exploring and operationalising linguistic features which he probably will not be able consciously to utilise for some years to come. His linguistic ability is not yet of the meta-linguistic kind with regard to attributes such as assonance, alliteration and syllabic structure and yet his play affords opportunities to experiment light-heartedly with these very same aspects of language. However, it needs also to be noted that this playful use of language is outside of the children's sociodramatic play. Linguistic rules are being broken here for comic effect ("Mr. Meakin" is transformed into "Mr. Mess") and this kind of rule-breaking is, arguably, incongruent with social pretend play and the rules which have to be adhered to in order for characterisations to be sustained and plot-lines mutually developed.

In the *Literature Review* chapter I discussed how the rule-governed nature of play bore strong resemblance to the rule-governed nature of "normal" language use (Bruner, 1983, p. 46). In my field work, what was equally noticeable was how the rules of both play and language also helped to inform, and be informed by, the "rules" of social routines and interactions. In like manner, and as observed in the previous paragraph, Vygotsky noted

how play necessitates the observation of accepted rules for social behaviour: “The child imagines herself to be the mother and the doll to be the child, so she must obey the rules of maternal behaviour” (1978, p. 94). Thus, Colin and Edward whilst playing *School* in Elsinor not only assumed the appropriate vocabulary and phraseology of their respective roles (Barrs, 1994), but actually used these linguistic paradigms to detail and display their relevant statuses and behaviours. In the following extract, for example, Colin and Edward do not merely use language which is character-apposite (apart from Colin calling the “teacher” by his first name!) but also linguistically portray in their play the superiority of the authoritarian teacher and the eager compliance of the willing pupil (a “neat” is a stamp for neat work):

- | <u>Edward</u>                       | <u>Colin</u>              |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1.                                  | Oh, can I have a neat     |
| 2.                                  | Can I have a neat         |
| 3.     Yep                          | Edward                    |
| 4.     For your writing. I'll draw  |                           |
| 5.     something for you.           |                           |
| 6.                                  | No, I'll draw something   |
| 7.     No I'll draw something       |                           |
| 8.     No that's not a pencil       |                           |
| 9.     Now this letter writ today   |                           |
| 10.    it's "a". And this an apple  |                           |
| 11.    If you finish it neatly I'll |                           |
| 12.    give you a neat O.K.? (.)    |                           |
| 13.                                 | Neat colouring. If I do   |
| 14.                                 | everything right do I get |
| 15.                                 | everything or             |
| 16.    No you don't get everything  |                           |
| 17.    until you do it very very    | O.K.                      |
| 18.    neat and stay in the lines   |                           |

(Appendix D, EPS, pp. 1-3)



Clearly in this extract one can observe language use and social interaction reciprocally helping to define and determine each other. For example, Colin – in the subservient role of pupil – asks with explicit subservience, “If I do everything right do I get everything or . . .” (lines 13-15), to which Edward’s authoritarian teacher responds with the requisite authoritative register, “No you don’t get everything until you do it very very neat and stay in the lines” (lines 16-18). Even before the teacher has finished his tirade, the submissive pupil has compliantly concurred with, “O.K.” (line 17).

To continue with the subject of linguistic “rules”, what was also apparent in the children’s pretend play was their ability to utilise appropriately “rules” of literary genres. Perhaps the most conspicuous example of this facility occurred in Alice and Zelda’s *Poorly Baby Sister* episode in Harfleur. Over the “four days and three nights” of this scenario (36 minutes in actuality) Alice “read” a total of three books to Zelda as she lay “ill” in the “hospital bed”. Interestingly, all three books were drawn from different literary genres: a counting book (the “animals story”), a “happy” book (the “telephone story”) and a thriller (the “scary story”) and as Alice “read” the books aloud she displayed numerous features appropriate to the different genres. Alice did use “real” books as props during this play but, as she confirmed in the interview which followed, she actually “made up” the stories as she went along. Also during the interview, Alice enumerated the “titles” of the three different stories: “the animals one, the telephone one and the scary one.” It may be worth repeating all three stories in order fully to appreciate the unconscious grasp of literary genre being displayed. This is the thriller story:

Alice

1. [to Zelda] Do you want this one?
2. Do you want this?
3. [whispers] It’s a bit scary

4. One day he looked in the passage. [shows book to Zelda] See
5. There was a noise
6. [whispers] What was it?
7. [joyfully] Oh, it's only teddy
8. [whispers] What's the noise?
9. Only the clock downstairs
10. But it was dark
11. What was the noise?
12. What was behind
13. [whispers] what was behind the curtains?
14. [joyfully] Cat. It's a cat
15. Then a fish was making a bubble noise
16. "Bubble bubble"
17. And he said, "I'm gonna get some biscuits"
18. And he got some biscuits
19. [frightened voice] Oh dear someone's coming
20. Drop the biscuits
21. [frightened voice] Look behind you. "Agh," shouted
22. [relieved voice] It's only a teddy. It's only
23. His mummy said, "Get back in your bed"
24. So he did
25. He was fast asleep (with) his mummy

Admittedly, Alice had the benefit on each of these three occasions of actual picture books which presumably helped her structure her story-telling in generically-appropriate ways. Nonetheless, it must surely be admitted that the insights displayed into the features of the thriller genre in this passage – both the story itself and also the way such stories are actually read aloud – are quite remarkable. Throughout the story, Alice is repeatedly able to utilise the thriller-writer's stock-in-trade of building up suspenseful instances ("There was a noise", "What was it?", "What's the noise?", "What was behind the curtains?", "Oh dear someone's coming", "Look behind you.

Agh”, etc.), only for them eventually to be discovered to be relatively innocuous (“Only the clock downstairs”, “It’s only a teddy”, etc.). Moreover, her vocal techniques further enhance this notion of increasing tension (whispering) followed by joyous relief. The achievement is even more noteworthy when one considers that, when I later discussed this play with two of the reception class teachers, they both expressed their astonishment at Alice’s abilities and commented that she was actually “quite shy and retiring in class”. Different generic features to that of the thriller can clearly be noted in the “counting story”:

### Alice

1. Do you want this one ‘cause it’s
2. It’s got lots of animals in
3. One day there was two horseys
4. one his dad and one his baby
5. When a lorry came past
6. How many goats did they have?
7. Count. One two three four five six
8. And then the man looked out the window
9. and said, “Go.” He looked cross
10. How many [horse sound] neigh?
11. One. One two three four five six seven eight nine ten
12. Ten [horse sound] neigh ones
13. How many dogs?
14. One. One two three four five six
15. Six [dog sound] woof dogs
16. One two three four five six
17. Six [cat sound] meow cats
18. One two three
19. Two chickens
20. One two three
21. Three bugs or whatever

22. There that's the end
23. Come on go to sleep

The suspenseful climaxes and releases pertinent to the thriller genre are clearly not present here as they were in the “scary story”, and the use of the reading voice is quite different (animal noises as opposed to whispered-and-relieved passages). Repetition of linguistic shapes and structures is brought into play, however, in ways consistent with the “counting book” genre: “Ten neigh ones . . . Six woof dogs . . . Six meow cats.” Further generic distinctions can be noted in the third and final book, the “happy story”:

Alice

1. Do you want this one?
2. Aidan [Alice's brother] has got this one
3. He was sad because the telephone
4. Or the telephone keeps
5. Say hello bunny
6. Bunny wants to say rude words
7. And then he got a piece of cake
8. and he got dirty after that
9. Yummy scrummy cake
10. And then mum came down and said
11. “Where's my teddy?” said baby
12. Painted the red round the chocolate cake
13. Then he phoned him up
14. Quick and quick and quick he did it
15. and then he run [panting sounds]
16. And then he got the telephone
17. He was on his way on a motorbike
18. And then he thought,
19. “Ugh ugh ugh”
20. “Stupid old telephone,” he said

21. “No more ringing,” he said
22. “Hello hello,” and he said, “Hello”
23. Everyone knew he was happy now
24. He was happy. He was happy
25. And then he ate all the cake
26. Happily ever after all shared the cake
27. Did you like this story? Did you?

*(Appendix D, HPS, p. 4)*

Although the narrative shape of this story is rather more difficult to discern than in the previous two examples, Alice clearly adheres in this instance to the Aristotelian notion (see Dorsch, 1965) of a comedy (i.e. Alice’s “happy” story) being a tale in which everything initially goes wrong for the main characters only for everything to turn out all right in the end. At the start, the central character is “sad” and “dirty”, but, after an exciting passage (“Quick and quick and quick he did it and then he run”), he ends up “happy”, everyone knows this, they all share the cake and the story concludes “happily ever after”. Three quite distinct literary genres are, then, utilised by Alice in her reading aloud and surely not all generic features on display here are a direct result of the “scaffolding” being provided by the books themselves. Rather, it may be argued that just as Alice does not yet have a meta-language for discussing and analysing linguistic features, so she does not yet have a “meta-literacy” awareness for evaluating literary genres. Nevertheless, her social pretend play in these instances does allow her to bring into operation the unconscious understanding of literary form which she currently possesses.

It may also be argued, of course, that this kind of play is useful reinforcement for such curricular provision as the “Literacy and Numeracy Hours” in English schools (e.g. Merttens, 2002). However, I would wish to stake a claim that it is more than mere curriculum reinforcement which is occurring here. For Alice is not only actively exploring linguistic and

literary features which may be relevant to her more formal academic pursuits, she is also – and I believe this to be a critical point which I shall return to later when discussing Humour/Pleasure in my field work – reinstigating for herself (and for the “poorly” Zelda) the notion of books as sources of potential pleasure, comfort and social communication (and the importance of pleasure for effective learning has been stressed throughout this work). In each instance Alice initially asked Zelda if she wanted the particular book and, after the conclusion of each story, she inquired, “Do you like it? Do you want to keep this one at home? Do you?” (after the “scary story”); “There that’s the end. Come on go to sleep,” (after the “counting story”); and “Did you like this story? Did you?” (after the “telephone story”). From conversations with many teachers, one suspects that the Literacy Hour does not always produce the same positive effect in encouraging children to appreciate the enjoyment to be gained from literacy and literature.

This leads us on to a critical question in discussing not only the linguistic benefits of pretend play but also all the developmental areas under scrutiny in this work. Namely, is it sociodramatic play *per se* which is helping to foster such abilities, or is it due simply to peer interaction? Would the same or similar developmental benefits be occurring if the children were operating together in a non-symbolic way – for instance, if they were sat together discussing the school disco? Is the element of pretence, in other words, an irrelevancy in these contexts to child development? Rubin (1980) is certainly under no doubts as to where the real educational benefits lie in the pretend play environment: “The major moving/guiding force is the peer interaction itself and *not* the dramatic activity *per se*” (1980, p. 81). Rubin is, of course, following in the footsteps of Piaget (1962) in arguing for the causal influence of peer interaction rather than play on development in general and social cognition in particular (1980, p. 76). And, to be fair to Rubin, he is able to cite a whole raft of empirical studies (nine in total) which purportedly stress the developmental significance of symbolic play

and yet which all display a “critical methodological problem” (1980, p. 77). Namely, all nine studies are unable to determine whether it is the fantasy play itself or the social interaction of which it is a part which has led to social and cognitive gains (1980, p. 77). My own reading has also encountered similar methodological shortcomings. I shall cite but one example – and this involves monkeys rather than humans. Suomi and Harlow (1976) experience little difficulty in detailing the deleterious effects on development for monkeys denied adequate play opportunities in early life. Some of these monkeys were reared in cages where they could see and hear, but not make physical contact with, other monkeys. These rapidly developed “obvious disturbances” (p. 492). Others were reared with their mothers but without the opportunity to interact with peers. These were found to be hyper-aggressive when they were finally exposed to peers at the age of eight months (1976, p. 491). Such observations allow the authors to conclude that: “It becomes obvious that play . . . is actually one of the most important aspects of social development” (1976, p. 494). But one is left wondering along with Rubin as to how the authors can claim that it is actually play which nurtures “normal” development and not simply interaction with one’s fellows. Suomi and Harlow’s research, in other words, exhibits precisely the same methodological shortcomings as those listed by Rubin (and, arguably, in their treatment of the monkeys, the research contains ethical failings as well). Doubtless, more research needs to be undertaken to determine conclusively whether or not social play possesses developmental benefits over and above those of mere social interaction, but an episode such as Alice and Zelda playing at *Poorly Baby Sister* referred to above surely provides us with some intimation of the positive effects of the fantasy element – the pretence – within such co-operative peer activity. We have already discussed some of the possible linguistic benefits of this episode to the participants but would these positive attributes still have occurred if Alice and Zelda were not pretending to be sisters? Would Alice have “made up” and “read aloud” three fictitious stories to Zelda had she not been motivated by a sympathetic urge to

comfort her ailing baby sister as part of the pretend scenario? Similarly, would Alice have explored her linguistic repertoire by regularly referring to Zelda as “sweetheart” and “darling” if the play had been factual rather than fictitious? Alice informed me in the interview which followed their pretend play that these were the words which her grandmother used to her in real life. In this instance, then, Alice could be regarded as drawing on hidden resources and assuming elements of an adult’s register (Barrs, 1994, p. 256). Would comparable linguistic exploration have conceivably taken place outside of fantasy play? Furthermore, as already mentioned, it is not only language development which Alice and Zelda’s pretend play arguably nourishes and nurtures. Throughout the 36 minutes of the episode, Alice (a “quite shy and retiring” girl, remember) adopted the persona of a confident, capable and very caring older sibling. She rang “mother” to reassure her that Zelda was going to be O.K.; she regularly comforted Zelda not only with words but also by physically holding her and supporting her; she made several “meals” (always pizza!) to aid her sister’s recovery; and at one point she said to Zelda, “Give me a hug”, enfolded her in her arms and whispered in her ear, “It’s gonna be O.K.”. In short, the care and attention Alice lavished on Zelda was unstinting and entirely selfless throughout the whole 36-minute play. With regard to section 4 of my *Literature Review*, how might such sustained characterisation have influenced Alice’s self-concept? How did she feel being such a responsible and conscientious carer? How did such painstaking mindfulness underpin Alice and Zelda’s moral outlook? And reflecting now on section 2 of the *Literature Review*, what social skills were being reinforced and developed for both Alice and Zelda? (Their co-ordination and co-operation must have been operating on the communicative and meta-communicative levels, and within and without the play-frame in order for such pretence to be sustained.) And would such interpersonal and intrapersonal understandings have been brought into play if the fiction had not been present, if the girls were, say, tidying up the play area together (an activity they later accomplished in a couple of minutes)? Would the motivation to continue the pretence and thereby the supportive



relationships have been present had the girls not been experiencing the pleasure to be had from sustained social symbolic play? Clearly, these are questions which further research must endeavour to answer but surely it must at least be a distinct possibility that not only does sociodramatic play assist development in a variety of areas but that it also provides hugely beneficial and supportive environments for such development to occur over and above those facilitated by simple peer interaction.

### **3. Sociodramatic Play and Perspective Taking/Social Cognition**

Due to the difficulties which the pupils at Agincourt School appeared to experience in attaining mutual pretence, I shall initially confine my analysis in this section to the data collected in Elsinor School (some of the perspective taking/social cognitive gains and abilities observed at Harfleur have, of course, been discussed towards the end of the preceding section). Later, though, I will focus specifically upon Agincourt in the hope that insights might be gleaned as to why the children achieved relatively minimal amounts of shared pretence and the implications this might have for theorising about their levels of social understanding. But first to Elsinor.

Not only are narratives from the social world enacted during sociodramatic play but, moreover, they are engaged with and examined from different viewpoints, affording children perspectives on situations not otherwise available (Bretherton, 1984). Here again, we have reason to refute Rubin's (1980) assertion that the developmental role of imaginative play is merely as "a method of exercising newly developed cognitive skills" (p. 76). How, we must ask, can non-fantasy social activity provide the same kind of opportunities as sociodramatic play for taking – and, indeed, "inhabiting" – a multiplicity of perspectives? Role-playing, by definition, requires that we assume roles (and, consequently, perspectives) other than our own. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, described Shakespeare as "myriad minded" (Hawkes, 1969, p. 26) precisely because of the playwright's exceptional facility in viewing a situation from a vast array of ideological standpoints.

Sociodramatic play and drama *per se* are, indeed, built on the prerequisite of a multiplicity of perspectives being brought into action. How, then, can Rubin (as detailed in the previous section) argue that non-pretend play would provide comparable opportunities for progression – because of the critical presence of peer interaction – when fantasy role-play can provide occasions for experiencing situations at first hand from perspectives other than one's own?

As previously intimated, what was particularly noticeable with regard to the adoption of personae other than oneself, and which shall be discussed further in the next section, was the children's penchant for assuming adult roles – especially those which entailed a degree of power and status such as teachers and parents. Garvey made the same observation from her own research: "Adult roles were the most favoured of all ages" (1990, p. 91). The adoption of such personae enabled the children, presumably, to view the world from a more privileged and prestigious vantage point than that which is normally available to them in "real life". Needless to say, however, the adoption of such characters in joint play is often dependent on other participants' preparedness to assume socially inferior roles. In Colin and Lizzy's *Parents* episode in Elsinor, for instance, this was not problematic as the "lesser" characters were denoted by dolls. During the *School* play (also in Elsinor), however, the situation was not always so readily resolved. As will be discussed in the section on Sociodramatic Play and Humour/Pleasure, Colin and, in particular, Edward were far from willing to perform obedient pupils to Andrea's teacher in spite of her repeated utilisation of a variety of teacherly strategies and set phrases to gain compliance: for example, "Edward. You spoilt it for all the children . . . Now go away and say sorry to them"; or "Stop what you're doing and show me that you're listening"; or "What's this then Edward Davis?". Lizzy, however, was far more willing to assume the "inferior" role of pupil to Andrea's teacher (in spite of the occasional attempt, as mentioned above, to portray an adult) and she regularly reinforced her willingness to accept the

pupil role – both inside and outside of the play-frame – in order that the pretence might continue: “I’ve got to write something haven’t I, Miss Parr?”; “Pretend we’ve got to do our work. . . . Pretend we’ve got to do our work. Got to do my work”; “I’m doing my work”. It would seem that, for Lizzy, it was more important to play than it was for her to insist on a superior role. Indeed, Lizzy perhaps gained some pleasure from enacting compliance, obedience and conscientiousness.

Equally interesting in Elsinor was Colin’s eagerness to be the compliant pupil in his *School* play with Edward, in spite of Edward’s very autocratic and demanding teacher. Colin’s pupil strove very diligently to produce work which Edward would reward with the wished-for stamps, but Edward’s teacher constantly refused to be satisfied: “So you don’t get any just a smiley face”; “Then you’ll get two . . . and not even four”; “No. I said lots of ‘a’s’. Now do it please”; and so on. These observations would appear to be congruent with Schwartzman’s findings (1978) that the metacommunicative messages of dominant children during pretend play were qualitatively different from those of less dominant children (cited in Goncu and Kessel, 1984, p. 8). Not until near the end of the episode did Colin appear to get frustrated with the never-satisfied teacher and avert his attention elsewhere. Significantly, this threat to the play caused Edward to lavish stamps on Colin’s work – the continuance of the pretence would seem to be too desirable a prize to lose: “You get all of them (not) just three. No five. You do get six. One two three four five six. And you have seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. You have ten stamps please”. Ms. Parr, in my subsequent interview with her, probably provided the reason for Colin’s willingness to persevere with such an apparently thankless role:

I picked Colin as one of your people because intellectually he’s a lot higher up but in play he’s very shy. . . . In play he used to sit on the very corner and do his own thing and listen. Now I’ve seen he interacts a lot more, especially with Edward. He finds Edward an

easy one because Edward's so bossy and into everything it's easy for Colin to play with him because Edward will say, "Do this, do that" and Colin's like, "Oh, I'll do that then".

*(Appendix C, EPS, p. 13)*

Edward's dominance, then, would seem to be inadvertently "scaffolding" Colin's induction into the social world of joint pretend play (Bruner, 1989). The social importance of such participation is stressed by Garvey: "Joining in the play of others and sharing playtime are central to children's social relationships" (1990, p. 155). Colin does not yet seem to have the confidence to take on a high-status character during his pretence with Edward, but his ability to engage with others appears to be developing through his willingness to assume a more minor role. Colin, therefore, provides us with an example of two potential educational benefits – that is, both the diagnostic and the remedial – provided by pretend play and argued for by Moyles (1989, p. 132): "Play in itself can serve both to identify children's needs and provide palliative measures". Ms. Parr, in Elsinor, had utilised the children's sociodramatic play for both of these purposes: it had been during passages of play that she had monitored Colin's reluctance to become actively involved ("In play he used to sit on the very corner and do his own thing and listen") and she had utilised play – and the more dominant figure of Edward – to improve Colin's self-confidence and social abilities in these areas.

The great degree of co-operation, co-ordination and shared understanding required to facilitate sociodramatic play has been touched upon repeatedly in this report (Dunn, 1988, p. 109). However, the extent to which mutual collaboration is an essential prerequisite for sociodramatic play was perhaps nowhere more apparent during my data collection than when successful joint pretence was *not* achieved. The most conspicuous example of this failure to attain mutual agreement in Elsinor School again concerns Andrea and her role as teacher. For over twenty minutes on my final day of

recording in that school she repeatedly attempted a range of strategies in a variety of environments to coerce, cajole, persuade and/or entice a number of children to become her pupils. She failed on every instance and only gave up her attempts when Ms. Parr drew the afternoon's activities to a close. One has to wonder, therefore, while sociodramatic play requires, and presumably nurtures, social co-operation and collaboration, what social understandings are being gained when successful play is not reached? After all, as detailed in section 3 of the *Literature Review* chapter, "not having anyone to play with when others are engaged with their companions is a serious and sad state of affairs" (Garvey, 1990, p. 155). Will Andrea eventually realise that, until she becomes more compliant, more acknowledging of others people's desires and demands, and more capable of seeing the world from their vantage point, she will continually risk failure in attempting to engage her peers in protracted pretend play – a prize apparently held in high regard by the children? As Garvey comments, "Social and communicative expertise as well as cognitive ability is reflected in [play] exchanges and their successful conclusion" (1990, p. 134).

In spite of Andrea's failed attempts to engage others in her shared pretence, however, the difficulties some children encounter in agreeing and sustaining joint pretend play were far more noticeable in Agincourt Primary School than in Elsinor. From the very first day of recording in this school, my field notes make continual reference to this problem:

The social abilities of these children, on the whole, appear significantly less than those of the two classes I have previously researched. At the moment, the relative lack of social abilities appears commensurate with their relative inability to engage in shared pretence.

(Appendix B, APS, p. 1).

Indeed, even the one passage of sustained sociodramatic play which I was able to capture in Agincourt was, arguably, only as the result of persistent striving and very sensitive social handling on the part of three of the children involved. Prior to the onset of the joint pretence, Craig had endeavoured for a full ten minutes to engage the other three – Angie, Mary and Jack – in shared play by adopting the (rather low status) role of a dog. Craig's dog was sometimes fawning and sometimes naughty (stealing the food in the restaurant) but always failed to initiate prolonged mutual pretence. Unsurprisingly, in the light of the discussion in the Cognitive Development section above, this was largely due to the children failing to agree a joint pretend focus; specifically in this instance, a joint scenario. Angie persisted in imposing a "going to the beach" story-line while Jack adamantly refused to move from his "going to my bonfire party" plot. After ten minutes, however, Craig proved successful in enlisting both Angie and Mary into his *Doggy* pretence. Both girls were now prepared to respond to Craig as a dog and, accordingly, developed a joint scenario. Angie began to prepare the previously mentioned doggy's "bed": "I'm tidying this bed up, doggy. Then I'll put it out, doggy," and Craig's dog responded with a couple of appreciative doggy "grunts". Jack, meanwhile, still refused to co-ordinate his play with that of the other three – he persisted in promoting his preferred "bonfire party" story-line. Mary, to my mind, then exhibited a significantly high level of social (and dramaturgical!) understanding in order to enlist Jack's co-operation. She turned to Jack "in character" and, from within the play-frame, metacommunicatively endeavoured to meld the two conflicting scenarios together by simply asking Jack: "Are we having a bonfire did you say?" In other words, Mary implicitly facilitated the entrance of her and Angie's characters – as well as the dog – into Jack's pretend world. Jack, however, still refused to join in. Angie then made a comparable overture to Jack and offered to help him with the preparation of the food, "Can I help you?" Jack continued to refuse to participate: "No." Angie went on with, "Shall I put it on the cooker?" and Jack responded with a surly and unhelpful, "Put it there." Mary then went a stage further than she

had done before. Now she did not endeavour merely to link the two conflicting scenarios together, but she even “cast” Jack as the father in their play. She gave him, that is, a role of high status, overcame the tension and conflict, and did this all metacommunicatively from within the play-frame by stating, “Erm excuse me dad. Dad. The dog’s scared of the bonfire. The dog’s scared of the bonfire.” Angie accepted this implicit development of the story-line and told the dog to, “Get under the table.” All their efforts had not been in vain, it would appear, for Jack – for the one and only time – actually joined in the pretend play: he told them that the dog was “all right”. Shortly after this, however, Jack again became aggressive with Mary and refused to participate further in the shared pretence. It would appear, then, that it was social (rather than purely cognitive) ability which helped Angie, Craig and, in particular, Mary to foster and develop their joint pretend play. By the same token, it would seem to be Jack’s difficulties in the social domain of understanding which render sociodramatic play, as yet, a very problematic area for him. Perlmutter and Pellegrini would presumably agree: “The ability to understand the points of view of others may facilitate and sustain fantasy play” (1987, pp. 278-9).

Once again, both my data and my wider reading here would seem to be at odds with the findings of Rubin (1980). In classic Piagetian manner, rather than conflict resolution being essentially the result of social understanding and the acceptance of perspectives other than one’s own, he argues that compromise is necessary to alleviate the unpleasurable mental state of “cognitive disequilibria” (1980, p. 80). My data would appear to lend support to a more social constructivist analysis and suggest that conflict resolution is less about internalised “thinking” processes (à la Rubin) and more to do with complementary co-operation in the social world. But my disagreement with Rubin goes still further. He argues that peer conflict does not actually occur during social fantasy play, but that, when disagreement does appear, the actors “break frame” and resolve their conflict in the “real world”, thereby allowing participants to re-enter the pretence in a conjoined

manner. This, says Rubin, is further evidence that it is peer interaction, once again, which is proving beneficial to social development rather than sociodramatic play (1980, p. 81). However, my data demonstrate beyond doubt that peer conflict does, indeed, occur during fantasy play itself and that participants do not necessarily have to “shift from the non-literal to literal world” (Rubin, 1980, p. 81) in order to achieve successful resolution. Indeed, my data indicate that conflict was, if anything, more not less likely to be resolved within the passages of pretend play than outside of joint pretence. Take, for instance, the following exchange between Rebecca and Kathy during their *Mummy and Big Sister* episode in Harfleur. As will be noted, the play generally progresses in an extremely amicable manner. The only threat to the equilibrium comes when Kathy implicitly suggests a development to the plot-line, utilising a piece of material as a “scarf”. Rebecca is clearly less than interested in this suggestion but is able to resolve the potential conflict without stepping out of character and without breaking the play-frame. Rebecca also appears to accept this “rebuttal” and the joint pretence is thereby able to proceed:

Rebecca

Kathy

1. Wow this one [a book] looks good
2. Let's see. Gosh. Gosh this one
3. looks good as well
4. And this one looks good it's got
5. number five on the front
6. These are all the books that
7. are ours O.K.?
8. Yes these are all the books that are ours
9. Sister what do you want for
10. dinner?
11. Anything
12. O.K. I'll see what I've got
13. Mum mum I've got you a new scarf



14. Oh that's nice sister
15. Do you want me to put it in the
16. wardrobe for you?
17. No it's for you if you buyed
18. it
19. Oh
20. O.K. right I'll just get dinner
21. ready O.K.? Do you want a
22. cup of tea?
23. No can I have some water?

Furthermore, it would seem that – as in this instance – it was often the desire to ensure the continuance of the pretence (presumably because of its intrinsically pleasurable nature) which encouraged participants to resolve tensions and conflicts – often, and again as in this instance, from inside the actual play-frame. Dockett's findings (1998, p. 113) would also appear to agree with mine. Should it be needed, Jock and Jim's *Eating, Fire-fighting and Shopping* episode provided yet another instance of successful conflict resolution from within the play-frame: Jock took Jim's pizza away from him while he was still "eating". Jim protested with, "I haven't eaten all mine," to which Jock explained, "It's not warm enough." Jim compliantly accepted this and the play was able to continue amicably through Jim saying, "I've eaten mine now." Had Rubin himself noticed sociodramatic play's ability to facilitate conflict resolution, he may have been less insistent in arguing for the supremacy of "peer interaction" over "dramatic activity" in achieving social-cognitive gains (1980, p. 81).

But to return to Agincourt. The relative paucity of sociodramatic play which I observed in this school must not, it should be noted, be held to imply that the pupils' play *per se* was less frequent or less sustained than that observed in either of the other schools. Rather, the majority of children recorded in Agincourt were concentratedly engaged in pretend play for the majority of

the time. The most significant difference, as previously alluded to, was that the overwhelming amount of play in which the children engaged in Agincourt was of a solitary nature. On day two of my data collection, for instance, Mary was engrossed for fourteen minutes in play on her own – until Shane came and snatched away the bowl of money with which she was playing. On day three, four children (the maximum number allowed in the restaurant area in Agincourt at any one time) were involved in virtually uninterrupted play for seventeen minutes but, again, the degree of social interaction was negligible. Indeed, “John” exhibited the longest continuous period of “good”, socially acceptable behaviour – eleven minutes – whilst engaged in solitary pretence in the restaurant which I observed of him in the entire three days that I was a member of this reception class. This observation was endorsed in my interview with Ms. Pollard, one of Agincourt’s reception class teachers, later that afternoon. Once again, then, it would seem that, whilst the children in Agincourt had the cognitive ability to engage in pretend play (they seemed, for instance, to experience no semiotic difficulty in allowing a play item to “represent” an item from reality), it was their relative social immaturity which rendered sustained sociodramatic play so difficult for them. Put another way, this observation would seem to conform to Piaget’s assertion that solitary pretend play is a less sophisticated form of pretence than shared play, but it would also disagree with Piaget and assert that the greater sophistication is due to increased social – rather than cognitive – competence: “ ‘According to Piaget, . . . a shift from solitary to social pretence may occur at about three years of age’ ” (Fein, G., 1981, cited in Dunn, 1988, p. 117). The ability to engage in sociodramatic play in Piaget’s paradigm of development, then, implicitly attributes the progress to cognitive advancement (see Sylva and Lunt, 1982, p. 162). My findings, however, suggest that it is primarily due to increased social understanding. These findings – betokening that, while advancements in play *per se* may be indicative of cognitive development, progression in sociodramatic play is fundamentally dependent upon growth in social cognition – are supported elsewhere in the literature (see, for

instance, Smith *et al*, 1998, p. 197). It is perhaps hardly surprising, then, that Smith *et al* (1998, pp. 198-9) assert “the evidence is better for the benefits of play for social competence” than it is for cognitive gains.

The relative social immaturity of the pupils at Agincourt might also be seen in the fact that Piaget identifies three years as the age where the shift from solitary to social play might occur. The Agincourt pupils were on average approximately two years older than this and yet still overwhelmingly indulged in solitary pretence. Indeed, the interviews with the two class teachers confirmed that they also were concerned about their children’s perceived lack of social understanding. Interestingly, during one of my preliminary visits to the class, Ms. Murphy emphasised to the children the need for social sensitivity during their time in the restaurant area. She stressed, “You have to share”, “You mustn’t throw the food around”, and so on, as if she were aware that the children might encounter difficulties in sustaining mutually-agreed pretend play. Ms. Pollard also confessed to me, prior to my first recording session, that she was nervous and feared the children would not provide me with the data I was seeking.

One other form of play was also observed to be more frequent than peer pretend play at Agincourt School and that was sociodramatic play within an asymmetrical relationship – in other words with an adult. The field notes from my research there persistently refer to the children’s attempts to enlist me within their play. Whilst being as friendly and as co-operative as I could, this clearly was not providing the wished-for instances of sociodramatic play amongst peers. Indeed, the children’s apparent need to pretend with a willing adult – rather than a peer – might also be indicative of immaturity in the play context. Perlmutter and Pellegrini’s research, for example, found that three year olds produced more fantasy play with their parents than with their peers whereas for children aged four and above it was the other way around (1987, p. 277). The Agincourt children’s social immaturity, in other words, might have (unconsciously?) encouraged them to seek joint pretence

with an adult as this offered a more satisfying, less problematic, sustained enjoyment than with a peer. Indeed, it may even have been that the children – possibly denied such opportunities at home (Smith, 1988, p. 193) – actually required adults to “scaffold” their development of pretend scenarios prior to their being able to accomplish such mutuality with their peers. Again this would appear to be congruent with the literature on the subject and would once more seem to indicate the relative immaturity of the Agincourt children within the social play context: “It appears, as Vygotsky (1976) hypothesised, that younger pre-schoolers do rely on more competent adult support” (Perlmutter and Pellegrini, 1987, pp. 276-7; see also Smith, 1988, p. 192).

The value and necessity of adult scaffolding of the children’s pretence was perhaps nowhere more apparent than on the final day of my data collection in Agincourt. “Helen” had previously only been recorded engaging in solitary pretend play. On day 3, however, the class teacher – Ms. Murphy – made a conscious attempt to join in the children’s pretence. Significantly, perhaps, Ms. Murphy’s engagement with the play was not superficial but wholly committed, thereby enabling her to “enhance and deepen the child’s experiences through intervention” (Kitson, 1997, p. 33). Ms. Murphy, that is, endeavoured to “interact” with Helen rather than merely trying to “intervene” in her play (Kitson, 1997, p. 36). She went towards the restaurant and asked Helen, “Can I order a take-away?” She then gave Helen her home address and the time she wanted the meal delivered. She was clearly attempting, in other words, to structure and to scaffold the development of the pretend scenario with Helen and, notably, from within the actual play-frame. As a result, it would appear that Helen had no difficulty whatsoever in sustaining the pretence – in spite of frequent interruptions and persistent calls upon Ms. Murphy from other children. Indeed, when Ms. Murphy broke away from the restaurant area four minutes later, Helen continued the pretence by carrying on her preparations for the take-away meal. One minute later, she then re-engaged Ms. Murphy in her

fictional scenario – and extended the story-line – by calling out to the teacher, “Ms. Murphy, what would you like for your pudding?” In all, this passage of asymmetrical play lasted for over six minutes (indeed, until Ms. Murphy called the session to a close) – more than twice as long as the single passage of symmetrical sociodramatic play I was able to record in Agincourt. This instance would appear to support the claims of Smilansky and numerous other researchers (e.g. Dockett, 1998; Kitson, 1997) that sociodramatic play can indeed be encouraged and developed through adult tutoring (Smith, 1988, p. 195).

Once again, then, the data would seem to suggest that, despite the Agincourt children’s relatively high age (around five), their social immaturity meant that they required adult assistance in their social play which would normally be applicable to children around two years their junior. This raises interesting questions about the value and appropriateness of adult intervention in children’s play – especially in a formal educational context. The literature – as well as my data – would indicate that adult intervention is desirable when children find it difficult to sustain sociodramatic play because of their relative paucity of social understanding. Children who are able to sustain joint pretence with their peers are, arguably, less needing of adult intervention (Perlmutter and Pellegrini, 1987, p. 276). These observations are particularly pertinent in light of the fact that, prior to my visit to Elsinor Primary School, Ms. Parr had actually been criticised by Ofsted inspectors for not regularly intervening in the children’s social pretend play – even though they were, of course, generally very competent in this area. My data would suggest that adult scaffolding is appropriate in children’s sociodramatic play where the children find difficulty in otherwise sustaining shared pretence but that – as with any successful learning process involving scaffolding – there has to come a moment of “handover” where the learner is deemed competent enough to continue the activity without the support of someone else (Buckingham, 1994; Meakin, 1998). Meckley, for instance, found “a sophisticated range of behaviours in the play of four- and

five-year-old children without the presence of an adult” (cited in Bennett *et al*, 1997, p. 5). Indeed, research would indicate that adult intervention in the sociodramatic play of socially-competent children might actually have a deleterious effect on its frequency, length and sophistication: “Pellegrini (1984) found with four year olds . . . adult presence was negatively correlated with interactive-dramatic play” (Perlmutter and Pellegrini, 1987, p. 270). Moreover, several teachers in Bennett *et al*’s study were able to recall instances when their interventions “had a detrimental effect” on the children’s play (1997, p. 41). I certainly observed several occasions in Elsinor when Ms. Parr’s well-intentioned interventions brought the pretence unwittingly to a premature halt. Note, for example, the following instance: Edward and Andrea were setting up a variety of impedimenta to commence a *Postman* story-line. Both had begun to prepare and write the “letters” which were to be delivered on their “rounds”: Andrea said, “I’ll write a message on a card so you know.” Ms. Parr – whilst engaged in a conversation with two other children – took this opportunity to “ring” Edward on a play-telephone:

Ms. Parr

Edward

1. Ring ring. Ring ring. Ring ring
2. Hello
3. Ring ring
4. Hello
5. Hello who’s that?
6. Postman Edward
7. Hello Postman Edward how are
8. you today?
9. Fine
10. Erm could you bring me a
11. letter please
12. Yeah
13. from the post office?

#### 14. Thank-you bye

This intervention then resulted in Edward leaving Andrea to “deliver” a card to Ms. Parr and the mutual pretence was not re-established. Apparently without realising it, and presumably in an attempt to follow the Ofsted inspectors’ guidance, Ms. Parr had brought to a close, before it had really commenced, the single possibility for joint pretend play between Andrea and Edward (both quite dominant children, remember) which I witnessed during my time with this class. It is perhaps hardly surprising, then, that Christie argues that adult intervention in pretend play when it has reached a certain level of sophistication should be phased out (cited in Smith, 1988, p. 195). This advice, moreover, would appear to be congruent with the social constructivist approach to learning adopted throughout this work. As Bennett *et al* note, the social constructivist theories of Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner “imply a proactive role for the teacher in creating challenging learning environments and providing appropriate assistance at the right time even in play activities” (1997, p. 12). A key phrase in this quotation must surely be, “at the right time”. Teacher intercession in children’s sociodramatic play must be sensitive to, and supportive of, the children’s respective levels of social competence – as well as, of course, their cognitive, linguistic and intrapersonal capabilities. Teachers can actively assist children’s learning and their learning how to play (Bennett *et al*, 1997, p. 14) but they must also be aware of the necessity of “handover” – of the refraining from intervention where appropriate – if the children are to become adept, autonomous players.

#### **4. Sociodramatic Play and Identity Construction/Emotional and Moral Development**

According to Vygotsky, play is “a novel form of behaviour liberating the child from constraints” (1978, p. 96). It contains the capacity, in other words, for wish-fulfilment – for the child to possess a command and control over events and situations not normally attainable in the “real” world. As

already touched upon, the ability of play to provide children with an otherwise unavailable status and power was notable in the roles which were most fervently striven for – for example, parents, older siblings, fire-fighters and teachers. Moreover, not only the striving for certain roles but also the ability to sustain the portrayal over a period of time are, arguably, essential if the child is ultimately to crystallise its own identity “in a social world of infinite roles and possible identities” (Berg, 1999, p. 18). To put it another way (and as examined in detail in the *Literature Review*), the assuming and continuance of roles other than one’s own paradoxically assists, in the final reckoning, the creation and understanding of one’s own emotions and character or, as Berg phrases it, the self is being subjected “to formation through the child’s working with different human stimuli from the outside world” (1999, p. 18). Sensitivity to the perspectives of others helps formulate a sense of self. Intrapersonal, as well as interpersonal, intelligence is thus fostered in sociodramatic play. Again, the ability of the children to adopt and sustain a convincing role was repeatedly apparent in the recorded passages of pretend play. For example, Colin and Lizzy in Elsinor enacting the personae of caring, protective parents:

- | <u>Colin</u>                       | <u>Lizzy</u>                |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Now me read this um book        |                             |
| 2. to the baby. It’s a hard        |                             |
| 3. book. It’s a real book this is. |                             |
| 4. Brush. Comb. Toothbrush.        |                             |
| 5. Shoes socks and boots.          |                             |
| 6. And coat hat. ( )               |                             |
| 7. Cup. Teddy. Doll. Baby.         |                             |
| 8. Car.                            |                             |
| 9.                                 | Leave the baby alone        |
| 10.                                | She’s asleep now she’s      |
| 11.                                | not looking at the pages    |
| 12.                                | You all right? (Take there) |



- |     |                               |
|-----|-------------------------------|
| 13. | She doesn't read anything     |
| 14. | she doesn't want ( ). Come on |
| 15. | Right. De de. Now sleep       |
| 16. | Go to sleep                   |

Lizzy's empathetic understanding of the "baby's" needs and wishes displayed in lines 12-16 may well be regarded as exemplifying the benefits of play previously referred to – namely, in allowing Lizzy to express the baby's feelings and desires, she is simultaneously being allowed to explore and express her own emotional terrain (Fein, 1991, p. 330). Furthermore, through "stepping out of herself" and "becoming a parent" Lizzy is thereby enabled to view her own self from the vantage point of another, thus arguably assisting in the development of her self-concept. Herron and Sutton-Smith (1982) cohere with this line of reasoning: "To establish a separate identity . . . the child must literally get outside of himself [*sic*] and apprehend himself from some other perspective" (cited in Moyles, 1989, p. 145).

Moreover, not only can sociodramatic play arguably assist in defining and understanding one's own personality, it can also help to constitute children's moral framework – their notions of right and wrong, good and evil (Berg, 1999). Especially noticeable in this respect in the data I collected were the two "serious" portrayals of pupils – on both occasions the pupils were depicted as industrious, polite and keen to please the teacher: ideals and values keenly promoted in this particular reception class and, arguably, in the wider culture of which the children were a part. Colin's diligent pupil, for instance, explicitly asked Edward's teacher, "Is this being helpful?"

The wish to portray characters of high status and also to utilise sociodramatic play's ability to reaffirm the supremacy of good over evil were not only evident in the children's play but also in the semi-structured interviews I conducted with them. The following is a case in point:

- |     | <u>Mr. Meakin</u>                | <u>Paulo</u> | <u>Jeff</u> |
|-----|----------------------------------|--------------|-------------|
| 1.  | Who do you like playing at       |              |             |
| 2.  | best? Goodies or baddies?        |              |             |
| 3.  | Goodies                          |              |             |
| 4.  | Goodies                          |              |             |
| 5.  | Why do you like playing goodies? |              |             |
| 6.  | 'Cause they                      |              |             |
| 7.  | always win                       |              |             |
| 8.  | So what kind of goodies might    |              |             |
| 9.  | you be in your play?             |              |             |
| 10. | I want to be                     |              |             |
| 11. | a knight                         |              |             |
| 12. | I want to be a                   |              |             |
| 13. | spaceman                         |              |             |
| 14. | Did one of you say you were      |              |             |
| 15. | going to be frightening when     |              |             |
| 16. | you were playing?                |              |             |
| 17. | Yeah. I was                      |              |             |
| 18. | pretending                       |              |             |

(Appendix C, HPS, p.1)

The children had no hesitation whatsoever in affirming their preference for assuming morally-good characters. Jeff's answer as to why this might be the case may initially strike one as being rather *immoral* – "'Cause they always win." However, rather than simply displaying a Machiavellian desire to be on the winning side whatever the cost, Jeff might conversely here be demonstrating an implicit understanding of genre: in most forms of literature – and especially children's literature – good overcomes evil in the end. Ultimate success and moral rectitude frequently go hand in hand in the stories and television programmes which children are most often exposed to, and it might be this which Jeff is unconsciously alluding to. Further

evidence of the moral surety pervading the children's play might be seen in Paulo's response to my question, "Did one of you say you were going to be frightening when you were playing?" Paulo was clearly concerned lest I thought that he was "really" trying to frighten someone and so clarified the situation for my benefit: "Yeah. I was pretending." Play, once again, was seen as something which was exciting and pleasurable, yet where cultural moral norms could be experimented with only ultimately to be reaffirmed. Jeff and Paulo's predilection not simply for morally good characters but also for exciting ones with high status can be seen in their choice of favourites: a knight for Jeff and a spaceman for Paulo. Both of these characters, one might hazard a guess, offer possibilities of perspective and power not normally available to the boys in real-life situations and might thereby, in their own small way, assist the boys' developing sense of others and, concurrently, their developing sense of self.

The *Literature Review* chapter of this work also detailed how social symbolic play might usefully assist emotional development as well as helping children to confront and perhaps accommodate anxieties and fears which are present in the "real" world. The play, that is, might possess therapeutic benefits for children and their feelings. One such instance occurred during Jock and Larry's *Pizzas and Fires* play in Harfleur. Jock appeared to be searching for reasons for Larry – his fellow fire-fighter – to stay at his "house" and allow him to cook and care for him. The following exchange then occurred:

Jock

Larry

1. Has your mum died?
2. No
3. Has your mum died?
4. No
5. She has

[Larry shakes his head]

6. No I mean your pretend mum

[Larry nods his head]

7. Well you have to stay

8. and visit here

Understandably, the notion of his mother dying initially appears wholly unacceptable to Larry – he twice says “No” to the suggestion and shakes his head the third time. However, after Jock has stepped out of the play-frame to explain, “No I mean your pretend mum” the appalling thought of the death of his mother seems to become more acceptable to Larry – on the fictitious plane at least. Indeed, when I inquired in the ensuing interview why Jock was “looking after” Larry, Larry seemed to experience neither difficulty nor hesitation in replying, “My pretend mummy was died.” Perhaps, the children’s sociodramatic play, then, has allowed Larry to encounter, and thereby possibly begin to accommodate, the seemingly unthinkable notion of his mother’s death. The feelings associated with such loss have been able, however tentatively, to be vicariously experienced in a pretend – and, therefore, “safe” – environment. Another, perhaps more “immediate”, instance of sociodramatic play allowing children possibly to “live through” difficult and distressing circumstances appeared in Rebecca and Kathy’s *Mummy and Big Sister* episode in Harfleur. Regularly during the thirty-eight minutes of this play, Kathy introduced and reintroduced the plot-line of her “nana” being ill in hospital. In the interview which followed their play, Kathy revealed that her grandmother was, indeed, currently in hospital but that she would be allowed home “in two days time”. Again, then, could the “safety” and the aforementioned “Perseus’s-shield” potential of sociodramatic play be helping Kathy to cope with difficult and unpleasant feelings currently worrying her? It is, of course, extremely problematic to prove beyond doubt that this is actually the case here, but surely such a hypothesis is not beyond the bounds of reason?

If social pretend play may, indeed, assist children in coming to terms with feelings and experiences difficult to encounter or to cope with in “the real world”, it is interesting to speculate as to why, as previously mentioned, all three reception teachers in Harfleur Primary School – in the semi-structured interview I conducted with them – were so adamant that toys such as swords and guns should not be allowed in school. Indeed, many nurseries and playgroups actually ban pretend weapons (Smith *et al*, 1998, p. 187). Ms. Swift had no hesitation in asserting that such play props “encourage aggression”. This in spite of the fact that, of all three reception teachers in Harfleur, she was the most ready to acknowledge the potential therapeutic benefits of sociodramatic play. It helps them “to work out situations,” Ms. Swift commented, “such as if a child is going into hospital or something.” But could it be argued that aggressive play such as shooting and sword-fighting might help children – especially boys (all three teachers said they had never witnessed this kind of play activity amongst girls) – to accommodate and make socially-acceptable aggressive and pugilistic desires and inclinations? Ms. Britten observed that, even though war play and war toys were not allowed in Harfleur, the boys still insisted on transforming “bricks and that, they’ll often make into guns and things.” Ms. Swift quickly added the comment, “But we always stop it, don’t we?” Indeed, researchers such as Carlsson-Paige and Levin (cited in Smith *et al*, 1998, p. 188) would agree with Harfleur’s reception teachers about the negative effects of aggressive play, but academic opinion on the subject remains divided. Sutton-Smith, for instance, argues that war play is clearly pretence for children and quotes the child who, when his father asked him not to play with toy guns, replied, “But, dad, I don’t want to shoot anybody, I just want to play” (cited in Smith *et al*, 1998, p. 188). Arguably, if boys are continually exhibiting such an inclination for play where good overcomes evil (albeit with a level of pretend violence involved), then socially-acceptable norms of morality are still, in the final reckoning, being reinforced and reasserted. Anti-social emotions such as aggression and

animosity are, moreover, being explored and, potentially, accommodated in a safe (because “unreal”) environment.

The *Literature Review* chapter of this work discussed Piaget’s (1976) observations on society’s ability to pass on its moral code. As we noted, Piaget emphasised the sense of “order”, the importance of regularity and rule-governed behaviour in early childhood. Piaget saw this transference of society’s rules, regulations, attitudes and values as lying at the heart of children’s moral understanding (1976, p. 413). Indeed, Rubin (1980) also comments on sociodramatic play’s ability to practise, consolidate and strengthen children’s understanding of “rule and role conceptualisations” and he includes those of “social role behaviours” (p. 73). Throughout my data collection, the notion of observance of social rules, expectations and regularities was time and time again encountered. Indeed, the repetitive nature of much of the play was in itself, I would suggest, indicative of sociodramatic play’s facility to reinforce notions of socially-appropriate cycles of behaviour and expectation. Observe, for instance, this break-down of Jock and Jim’s *Eating, Fire-fighting and Shopping* play:

0-3 minutes:	working (putting out fires)
3-9 minutes:	eating
9-11 minutes:	working (putting out fires)
11-16 minutes:	eating (Jock says it is “dinner-time”)
16-18 minutes:	working (putting out fires)
18-22 minutes:	eating (Jock says, “Let’s get eggs for tea”)
22-28 minutes:	shopping (Jim explains the boys’ failure to return immediately to work by saying, “It’s our day off today.”)
28-29 minutes:	working (putting out fires. Jock says, “This is the last fire we’re putting out today.”)
29-32 minutes:	shopping

Could it be that the boys' quite rigid adherence to the cycles of work-and-eating and work-and-eating-and-shopping is symptomatic of their induction into society's norms, expectations and regularities? Is the play assisting in the boys' enculturation not only into the cycles, rules and roles of their society but, along with this, their culture's moral framework? Are culturally-desirable concepts such as work, working together and caring for one another being reinforced and reinstated in their sociodramatic play? In summary, is sociodramatic play – in all the examples cited in this section – conceivably assisting development in those overlapping areas detailed in section four of the *Literature Review*: in the children's self-concept formulation, their emotional, intrapersonal growth and their increased moral understanding? My data would seem to suggest that this is, indeed, the case.

## **5. Sociodramatic Play and Humour/Pleasure**

Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of the play which I observed was how enjoyable it was for all the children who participated. Vygotsky himself was aware of the importance of pleasure in play and cautioned against overlooking this feature: "Theories which ignore [this] fact . . . result in a pedantic intellectualisation of play" (1978, p. 92). Before moving on to examine specifically the notion of humour and sociodramatic play, it may be worthwhile noting the extent to which the children's curricular activities informed the content and nature of their play and the pleasure thereby reciprocally nurtured in the more "academic" aspects of schooling – a topic which I first visited in the Language Development section above. There is a commonsensical assumption that "work" and "play" are polar opposites, the one operating in extreme contrast to the other (Moyles, 1989, pp. 85-87). However, my recorded data from Elsinor School in particular but also from Harfleur (see my comments on Alice and Zelda's *Poorly Baby Sister* episode above) repeatedly reveal the extent to which the children's pretend play was facilitative of, and complementary to, the learning which had been encountered during more formal curricular activities. Time and time again, the children's play re-enacted procedures such as making their own story

booklets, repeating the sounds and actions connected with particular letters, colouring and drawing activities, and also mathematically-based routines. Of course, it may be argued that this was because a significant proportion of the children's play which I recorded in Elsinor – unlike Agincourt and Harfleur – was focussed upon the *School* table (although not all the pretend *School* play which I observed occurred in this location) but what appeared particularly significant was the extent to which curricular activities were engaged in with much greater enthusiasm and motivation during pretence than during “reality” – again, a feature I have commented on previously. Andrea, for instance, approached her writing with far more eagerness in the afternoon's play than in the morning's Literacy Hour – and it was as a result of her play activity that she was able to produce a completed booklet and show it to the rest of the class at the end of the following day. Ms. Parr, the class teacher, herself noted Andrea's increased motivation for curricular work during play periods in the interview I conducted with her. She commented how, in play, Andrea had “really taken off with the routines of the class” and how, again in play, her “language is really coming out”. The pleasure engendered in pretend play, in other words, was arguably a greater motivational factor towards curricular activity than the mere activity itself. During play, literacy and numeracy activities seemed to acquire a meaning and a significance for the children not so readily apparent during their respective curriculum “Hours”. As Ms. Parr noted, if Andrea writes during play, it is because she genuinely wishes to communicate something to someone else; in Ms. Parr's words, “The writing becomes important.” Potter made similar observations from her own research: “Young children, quite naturally, use pretend play to . . . practise their developing understanding of print and its uses” (1996, p. 14). These observations would seem to be commensurate with research findings in both England and Australia which concluded that play can encourage most under fives to engage enthusiastically in literacy-focussed activities (Hall, 1995; Reynolds, 1997; cited in David, 1998, p. 62). The pleasure and enjoyment nurtured through play, then, need not necessarily be regarded as a diversion and “escape”



from the more arduous, and the allegedly more “important”, curricular routines of schooling, but more accurately perhaps can be seen as a potential mechanism for deepening children’s engagement with aspects of the curriculum in a manner which has greater affective and motivational potency (Moyles, 1989, p. 86).

However, although a number of parallels were drawn in the *Literature Review* chapter between play and humour – both are human, social, pleasurable, operate on two planes of reality and are highly rule-orientated – and, moreover, the central importance of pleasure to play has been continuously stressed, it may come as a surprise to note that, in all the research I have undertaken, the use of humour has, in each and every case, operated antagonistically to the continued, shared play. These results, it should be noted, are diametrically opposed to those of Bergen (2001) who found a considerable amount of humour during children’s play time and, most significantly of all, concluded that, “Social pretence had the most instances” (cited in Bergen, 2003, p. 48). To commence this aspect of the discussion, and my refutation of Bergen’s findings, it may be worth quoting at length a passage from my pilot research (1999) at Elsinor Primary School when the potential incompatibility of humour with social pretend play first began to make its presence felt<sup>3</sup>:

While it is certainly true that the children manifestly enjoyed their joint play (indeed, “Hazel” cited as the reason why she did not wish to cease playing when it was time for dinner as “Cause we were having a good game”) it is possibly significant that comedy as such was never used to enhance the pretence and, when it did appear, it was without exception to the danger and detriment of the continued play. The example of the *Cat, Food and Foreign Chefs* episode [where two boys were “feeding a cat”] is perhaps the clearest

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning again that during this pilot research, and unlike all my later research, I did not use a video camera and, consequently, when transcribing the data I only had access to audio information.

indication of this, although the examples and issues it gives rise to were by no means unique:

- |     | <u>“Steven”</u>              | <u>“Simon”</u>              |
|-----|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1.  | You can’t have all this      |                             |
| 2.  |                              | I’ll give you some chicken  |
| 3.  |                              | Where’s the chicken         |
| 4.  |                              | There. Chicken chicky chick |
| 5.  | Do you want some beans       | Ah                          |
| 6.  |                              | There you go                |
| 7.  | I’ll get you some egg        |                             |
| 8.  |                              | Do you want a brush to eat  |
|     |                              | [Laughter]                  |
| 9.  | Do you want a brush to eat   |                             |
| 10. |                              | (Want) sssiiirrrr           |
| 11. | Do you want some beer        |                             |
| 12. |                              | Eh eh                       |
| 13. |                              | Do you want some more bread |
|     |                              | [Laughter]                  |
| 14. |                              | I’m not doing anytheeeeeng  |
| 15. |                              | I not                       |
| 16. |                              | Errr. Wha’d’you waaant      |
| 17. | Do you want a orange         |                             |
| 18. |                              | Do you want some a orange   |
| 19. | Simon                        |                             |
| 20. |                              | Do you want some a          |
| 21. |                              | That is not a ball          |
| 22. | Do you want some tomatoes    | it’s a orange               |
| 23. | Do you want a piece of wood  | Want some a thees           |
| 24. | Do you want a piece of woood |                             |
| 25. | (Or) this?                   |                             |
|     |                              | [Laughter]                  |
| 26. | Do you want this             |                             |

27. Do you want this
28. Do you want some a brush
- [Laughter]
29. Look. Look
30. Do you want some cheese Da da da da
31. I'll put some cheese in da da da da
32. Cheese cheese cheese cheese do do do de da
33. And some do you want some
34. biscuits. Bishy bishy They're carrots
35. biscuits

On line 8 Simon asks, "Do you want a brush to eat" presumably prompted by the presence of a brush. The question is clearly ridiculous within the context of the play (cats do not eat brushes) and is followed by laughter. Does this endanger the continuance of the pretence? On line 10 Simon then commences a stereotypical comic "foreign accent". Again, is this to the detriment of the depth of engagement with the play? Indeed, at line 19 Steven appears to get annoyed with Simon's clowning and exclaims, "Simon". Simon, however, continues to play for comic effect until, at line 28, Steven seems to adopt an attitude of "if-you-can't-beat-them-join-them" and even employs Simon's earlier strategy of offering something inedible to the "cat": "Do you want a piece of wood?". The laughter continues and the pretend play soon breaks down completely having only lasted a total of 35 lines. When Simon and Steven recommence playing, the element of pretence is clearly unsustainable. The boys appear more concerned to continue the comedy and to utilise humour to encroach into taboo areas: for instance, "Oh my boobies" and "She's scratching my bottom". The question this possibly gives rise to, then, is: what is the function of comedy/humour in children's sociodramatic play? Must it always be anarchic and subversive

(threatening the sustainability of the pretence) or does it positively assist social relationships?

These observations from my pilot research about the possible incompatibility of humour and sociodramatic play would clearly appear to be at odds not only with Bergen's research but also with Garvey's observation that: "Children do indeed . . . often smile and giggle, signalling to each other their genuine pleasure in the play" (1990, p. 139). Note also Smith *et al* (1998): "In children . . . laughter and the associated 'open mouth play face' usually signals [*sic*] play" (p. 178). Is the distinguishing factor here between play in general and social pretend play? Is sociodramatic play in some sense a "more serious business" than other forms of play (such as rough-and-tumble which is "typically signalled by smiling and laughter" [Smith *et al*, 1998, p. 186])? Interestingly, whilst Bergen distinguishes between what she terms "serious make-believe" (where children endeavour "to replicate the real world") and "joking make-believe" (during which children "distort the real world") (2003, p. 47), she also goes on to state that, "There are presently no studies of social pretence that have separated observational data into categories of serious make-believe and joking make-believe" (2003, p. 49). This work attempts to plug the gap by asking the question, "Is it sociodramatic play which is actually 'serious make-believe' as opposed to other forms of play which may be categorised, in part at least, as 'joking'?" If so, why should this be the case? Does it, I wonder, have anything to do with the notion discussed in the *Literature Review* chapter about humour-as-a-safety-mechanism (i.e. joking, unlike sociodramatic play, being decidedly *unempathetic*?); or does it, perhaps, also have some connection – again as detailed in the *Literature Review* – with the fact that funniness is concerned with the breaking-and-marking of rules whilst shared pretend play necessarily involves their observation?

Significantly, in the light of this discussion on sociodramatic play and humour (as opposed to pleasure), the single sustained passage I recorded

during my field work *per se* when laughter was most overtly striven for and obtained was a passage where the sociodramatic play was in constant danger of falling apart. It occurred in Elsinor when Edward and Colin attempted to join Andrea and Lizzy's *School* play. Needless to say, Andrea wished the newcomers to accept pupil roles, "Edward can you two be the kids please?". Edward immediately answered, "No" to this suggestion and proposed an adult male role for himself, "There needs to be a boy, boy one as well there needs to be Mr Meakin in this school so I'm Mr Meakin". Shortly after this, Andrea then seemed to adopt an attitude of, "Well if I can't get you to be a pupil in our play then I'll try and make you laugh" and she did this by repeating her well-worn teacher's phrase, but this time in a funny, staccato voice whilst simultaneously patting herself on the head: "Stop what you're doing and show me that you're listening". This did, indeed, elicit laughter from the boys, presumably because – faced with the breakdown of her sociodramatic play – Andrea had both broken and marked implicit rules about acceptable behaviour for teachers: they don't talk in funny voices and pat themselves on the head whilst addressing their pupils. Edward then continued with a variety of strategies to undermine the pretence and "play it for laughs". For instance, at one point he appeared to adopt the role of compliant pupil by obligingly providing the requested apology, but then immediately revealed his true cards by calling the "teacher" by her own name: "Sorry, Andrea Yule". Again, a rule of expected behaviour in school had been both breached and recognised: children do not call teachers by their first names. Although this display of wit is antithetical to the successful continuance of the play, it nevertheless displays a remarkable degree of quick thinking on Edward's part: whilst apparently conforming to the teacher's request, he was nonetheless simultaneously metacommunicating the message, "You might want to be the teacher and you might think I'm being a pupil but really you're just plain old Andrea Yule and not really Ms. Parr at all". Once again, then, it would appear that sociodramatic play and humour are inimical to one another. The rule observance essential to social pretend play would indeed appear to be antithetical to the rule-breaking-

and-marking required for humour – an issue I first raised in the *Literature Review* – and, consequently, the two would appear to be incapable of operating simultaneously. Indeed, I made this observation to Ms. Murphy, one of the reception class teachers in Agincourt School and, on reflection, she admitted to never having witnessed the children laugh during social pretend play whereas bursts of laughter were frequent during other play activities. Whilst rule-orientation is fundamental to both humour and social pretend play, then, the differing requirements they have of rule-observation would appear, in part at least, to account for the fact that I have not witnessed sociodramatic play and humour co-existing in the research I have carried out. Sociodramatic play, it would seem, whilst being inherently pleasurable is also, surprisingly perhaps, inherently humourless.

There is also, though, a second feature of sociodramatic play and humour which may account for their incompatibility and this concerns the notion of empathy, again discussed in the *Literature Review*. In adopting a role in sociodramatic play, children are, to a degree at least, adopting the viewpoints and characteristics of someone other than themselves. They are “making an imaginative leap from their actual situation or roles into a supposed one” (McGregor *et al*, 1977, p. 11). To play a role is to experience vicariously the world from another perspective – it is fundamentally empathetic. Laughter, on the other hand, as we have already seen, may be regarded as inimical to empathy. In making potentially dangerous situations “safe”, humour arguably distances us from the humanity in a human situation. It puts us on the “outside” rather than the “inside”. Bergson appears to be in agreement here: “I would point out . . . the *absence of feeling* which usually accompanies laughter. . . . look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy” (1980, pp. 63-4). Humour, in other words, appears to take the heat – the empathetic emotional engagement – out of a situation. As stated earlier, I may laugh at a joke about a starving African, a person with cerebral palsy, or someone with Down’s syndrome – but only so long as I refuse to see the situation

from their point of view or from the point of view of someone closely associated with them; only so long as the danger appears – to me at least – to be “not real” and, therefore, to use Morris’s words, does not need to be taken “seriously” (1967, p. 103). Sociodramatic play, on the other hand, forces me to adopt the perspective of a character within the drama: my viewpoint is not “safe” and from afar, it is from the inside-out. Might this dissimilarity, then, between sociodramatic play and comedy be another reason why I have been unable to observe them occurring simultaneously? For instance, in both examples cited above, neither Steven nor Edward is making any genuine, concerted attempt to “inhabit” the role they are supposedly portraying. Steven is not really attempting to be a “cat-feeder” – he is offering it a brush to eat. Edward is not really endeavouring to display the characteristics of a pupil – thus he calls the teacher by her full, and “real”, name. The lack of empathetic engagement with the role in each case, then, would seem to be facilitating the boys’ ability to “stand outside” of the situation and to “play it for laughs”. On the other hand, look at the “seriousness” and the deep sense of vicarious involvement exhibited as Alice strives to comfort and care for Zelda, the “poorly baby sister”:

#### Alice

1. [all of the following is delivered in a very calm *sotto voce*:]
2. Come on. Hold your handbag. I will hold your book for you if you
3. hold that. Here you hold that and I will hold your dress. Sit on the
4. chair first. Sit here. I’ll get your stuff packed. There. All right?
5. Give me your handbag. Give me it. You’ll be better in the morning.
6. ‘Cause it’s time to go to sleep. Now this is my bedroom. Sleep here
7. on the floor. Shhhh.

How possibly, one might ask, could Alice have been so deeply engrossed in the portrayal of a concerned and conscientious parent whilst simultaneously being involved in trying to make Zelda laugh? Surely, vicarious, empathetic engagement and joke-making cannot co-exist? Moreover, how can one

sustain and continuously apply the rules of maternal loving care in this instance whilst simultaneously breaking these rules and “sending them up”? One has only to think of a thousand instances in the rehearsal room of a professional theatre (and occasionally on stage as well) and remember those times when something has been said or done to shatter the theatrical illusion and the entire company has consequently “corpsed” and fallen about laughing. I can think of one occasion, for instance, when the actor playing Romeo forgot to bring on his dagger for the final scene in the Capulets’ sepulchre. The hapless Juliet, consequently, on waking to discover the dead Romeo, had nothing with which to commit suicide and so proceeded to enact a very unconvincing form of “self-strangulation”. Needless to say, genuine empathetic engagement – on the part of both the actors and the audience – was thereby sacrificed along with Juliet herself. In conclusion, then, and in opposition to the findings of Bergen (2003), my field work would seem to indicate quite conclusively that humour and social pretend play are not happy bedfellows and that the cause of this might well be two-fold: (1) comedy is concerned with the breaking-and-marking-of-rules whereas sociodramatic play is concerned with rule-observation and rule-extension; (2) sociodramatic play (indeed any kind of role play, including the work of a professional actor) is fundamentally empathetic in nature whereas humour necessitates its opposite: affective detachment from the object, the butt, of the joke. Consequently, comedy and social pretend play would appear unable to operate simultaneously.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

#### **The Contribution of this Thesis to Theory**

The discussion of the findings of my field work reviewed in the previous chapter might be held not only to support but even, on occasions, to further the claims for the value(s) of sociodramatic play detailed in the *Literature Review*. My data certainly indicated the potential benefit of social pretend play for abstract and conceptual thinking, including children's ability during sociodramatic play to communicate implied, rather than overt, meanings and to transpose and transfigure event schemata from the "real" world into the imaginary. Creative thinking was manifested, especially, in the children's employment of the non-literal and the invisible. Linguistic development was noted as children utilised other people's vocabularies and registers and also demonstrated appreciation and understanding of certain literary genres. The "playing with language" recorded by numerous researchers, however – such a conspicuous feature of many other forms of play – was primarily noticeable by its absence in the children's sociodramatic activities, probably because of sociodramatic play's inherent insistence on rule-observance rather than the rule-breaking which is necessary for much playful linguistic exploration. Role play's utility in nurturing a positive self-concept and in furthering children's moral and emotional areas of understanding was a consistent and conspicuous feature of my field work. Children's notions of right and wrong, of good and evil, of the importance of caring, empathetic behaviours, and the positive positioning of their own conception of themselves within their moral landscape, were all recurrent features of their pretend play. Finally, although pleasure was seen to be an ever-present and fundamental facet of sociodramatic play, overt humour only ever operated to its detriment.

And so to return to the three research questions initially posed:

1. What types of development are nurtured through children's sociodramatic play?
2. How do these aspects of development manifest themselves during sociodramatic play?
3. How might these various types of development interrelate during sociodramatic play?

We might not only acknowledge the manifestation of these developmental features in social pretend play, but might also speculate that engagement in joint pretence is helping to further the children's cognitive, affective, linguistic, moral and interpersonal abilities. Moreover, again as previously hypothesised, the overlap and interplay between these various strands of development would appear to be extreme, making it highly problematic to attempt to view the different facets as in any way discrete or self-standing.

Certain of the developmental areas demarcated in this research and their relationships with sociodramatic play – especially the cognitive, the linguistic and the social – have already been researched extensively and my work, by and large, has primarily succeeded in reaffirming various extant findings. This is not to denigrate these aspects of the project, though – I have been at pains to stress throughout that many practitioners and policy-makers need reminding of these potential benefits of social pretend play. However, it must also be noted that much preceding research has not focussed upon children's play in naturalistic surroundings and – even more significantly in making claims for the contribution of this study to existing theory – relatively little research has focussed exclusively upon sociodramatic play. Other aspects of this work, and especially the elements concerned with sociodramatic play and humour, have a persuasive claim to originality and have arisen directly out of my field work as opposed to pre-existent research. Sociodramatic play – in spite of the intense pleasure to be gained therefrom – has been seen to be, in certain respects, a very serious

business indeed. To behave frivolously during pretence is to superficialise the play and to jeopardise its continuance.

### **Implications for Early-Years Practitioners**

With specific regard to my second research question – concerning how developmental aspects manifest themselves during social pretend play – it is perhaps worth contemplating the multifarious ways in which sociodramatic play and, presumably, its accompanying developmental attributes have been seen to be potentially optimised. With regard to the physical environment utilised to facilitate conjoined fantasy play, my research in Elsinor Primary School, in particular, has indicated the desirability of a broad range of good quality play props and costumes which are varied on an almost daily basis. It would also seem that to present these accoutrements in a way which thematically links objects together can help stimulate and direct the actual content of the children's play. This might be a useful consideration if the teacher wishes to facilitate play of a particular kind for remedial or palliative purposes. However, as Broadhead (2004, p. 72) notes, such themed provision might actually militate against the stimulation and accommodation of alternative play scenarios – a point which I myself have earlier observed when discussing the need, because of a broken window, to focus upon sociodramatic play in Elsinor School beyond the boundaries of the Home Corner. With justification, consequently, Broadhead (2004, p. 72) suggests the provision of a “whatever you want it to be place” incorporating, perhaps, such items as empty boxes, fabrics, hats, cushions, a clothes horse and so on, with the intention of enabling children's play across a much broader range of thematic areas. In addition, an environment relatively free from extraneous distractions – such as the atrium in Harfleur – would seem to be conducive to supporting both the depth and the durability of children's social pretend play, unlike the restaurant corner in Agincourt which, whilst lacking novelty, also appeared to be subject to unhelpful noise and disruptions occurring simultaneously in other parts of the same classroom. Moreover, the stimuli materials – as well as being attractive and various –

should also include objects likely to promote the kinds of play favoured by boys as well as girls. My field work in Harfleur, for example, demonstrated – to the surprise of the teachers – the relative lack of “boy-friendly” props and costumes. The rather thorny issue of whether items should be provided which facilitate “violent” play – such as toy guns and weapons – remains a moot point and one which, in the current climate, is perhaps best avoided by not incorporating such items. Furthermore, time and space must be created for sociodramatic play including the availability – and the preparedness – of teachers and other adults to support, scaffold and progress the children’s play as and when appropriate. My research has quite clearly indicated that adult intervention, when it involves genuine, deep engagement with the characters and the content of the children’s play on the part of the grown-up, can certainly help develop and enrich the fantasy. This appears to be especially important when children are experiencing difficulties in achieving prolonged pretence with their peers: such an instance was seen in Ms. Murphy’s “take-away” play with Helen in Agincourt. Superficial and momentary adult intervention in the children’s play, however, as witnessed in Elsinor, can actually have a negative effect on the length and complexity of the pretence. Harfleur’s atrium again showed how children who are capable of quite autonomous social pretend play are also able to sustain, develop and deepen their mimetic activity for very lengthy periods when extraneous distractions and adult interventions are both minimised.

### **Implications for Policy**

The preceding point necessarily brings us back to the central importance of “political will” if the potential benefits of sociodramatic play are truly to be realised within the formal educational sphere. Teachers, classroom assistants and others might be helped to recognise and understand the potential benefits of social pretend play through initial training and/or in-service training. This would necessarily need to include guidance on particular types of interventionist strategies in the children’s play and when this might be advisable (and when not). Teachers might also be taught how

to observe and track children's play for assessment purposes, relating attainment in play to more formal curricular advancements. Alice's literary prowess displayed during my field work might, for instance, be related to her performance in Literacy Hour in order to provide a more holistic overview of her achievements in school. Once again, though, the necessary time and training required for teachers to be able to assess children's play effectively must be acknowledged and provided for.

The importance of the affective domain within children's learning and development has been emphasised throughout this work and the central significance of, in particular, pleasure to human advancement has been continually highlighted. Arguably, a prime reason why the human race has survived and progressed for as long as it has is, ultimately, due to the sense of enjoyment and fulfilment to be gained from sex, certain foods, challenges, creative and curious endeavour, and so on (see, for example, Freud, 1990). Our emotions have guided our development in ways not always acknowledged. In like manner, the importance of pleasure and fun to formal educational learning has often been studiously avoided in both political pronouncements and curriculum documentation in spite of its pivotal role in stimulating children's motivation and perseverance. Hopefully, a change of heart (and direction) is signified in the fact that a recent government publication in England is entitled, *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfES, 2003). The pleasure to be achieved during and from sociodramatic play has consistently been seen in my research to provide a readily-available opportunity for nurturing and advancing children's cognitive, linguistic, social, moral and emotional abilities in a productive, prolonged and progressive manner. Children enjoy sociodramatic play and, presumably, always have. The pleasure to be gained from such activity, therefore, might be held to indicate that the said activity has been providing developmental benefits since time immemorial. Why should we assume that our 21<sup>st</sup> century "brains" necessarily know better than our inherited "instincts"? Significantly in this regard, all six teachers whom I interviewed

expressed, in one way or another, a “gut feeling” or a simple sense of knowing that play – and the enjoyment contained therein – was, quite naturally, “good” for their children.

Both the literature read and the field work undertaken in this study, then, – the “theory” and the “practice”, if you will – have helped to reinforce and broaden my belief that sociodramatic play possesses very definite potential gains for children in a variety of developmental areas. Interestingly, perhaps, this increased awareness and understanding of the value of sociodramatic play has also further reinforced and deepened my belief in the social importance of the professional theatre work in which I am involved. Just as my research has convinced me of the utility of social pretend play for children, so I believe that drama and theatre can help adults – as well as young people – to understand more about the social world of which they are a part and also to become more sensitive, more aware and more fulfilled human beings.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

To claim that sociodramatic play may well have benefits for child development in a diversity of domains should not, though, be held to imply that these developmental gains cannot be accrued by other means (Smith, 1988, pp. 198-9). Further research surely needs to be undertaken to attempt to clarify whether social pretend play is particularly effective in nurturing development in the domains investigated or whether other activities are equally or more efficacious. As previously commented, such additional research is necessary in order to clarify whether sociodramatic play *per se* assists development across a number of areas or whether it is essentially the interaction among peers which occurs during social play (Piaget, 1962; Rubin, 1980) which is actually crucial for developmental gains. It could be the case that research into solitary pretend play might help clarify the potential benefits of symbolic pretence over and above that of simple peer interaction but this is dubious. Apart from the essentially cognitive gains to

be accrued from sociodramatic play (roughly, section 1 of my research), all of the other areas of development scrutinised in this work – the linguistic, the interpersonal, the emotional, moral and intrapersonal, and the humorous – possess an intrinsically social dimension. Hence the utility of a social constructivist paradigm of progress in the analyses undertaken. The study of children playing in isolation from others, therefore, would seem to have little potential benefit for this line of work. Comparative research, however – where children are investigated engaged in both social symbolic play and also other social *non*-symbolic activities (such as talking in the playground, brushing each other's hair, eating together, and so on) – might be one fruitful way of deciding whether the developmental advantages of sociodramatic play occur solely as a result of social interaction (or not). The work of Pellegrini (1985) cited in the section on Sociodramatic Play and Language Development, where the linguistic benefits of social pretend play were advantageously compared with other forms of interpersonal contact, is just one example of such research.

Methodologically speaking, my research has convinced me of the value of the latest technologies in this form of ethnographic work. The radio mics, in particular, allowed me to obtain first-class recordings – where literally every whisper was audible – in a surprisingly unobtrusive manner. The post-play semi-structured interviews with the children, however, were rather more problematic and the need to give these interviews as much time, space and forethought as any other aspect of the research became increasingly apparent. Ultimately, I believe I did succeed in creating a structure and process for these interviews which allowed me to obtain important data.

However, whilst the latest technologies did, indeed, prove invaluable, it should also be acknowledged that, in terms of the literature I have incorporated into this work, I have not been afraid to utilise the writings and observations – not solely of educationists, psychologists, sociologists, and the like – but also of novelists, poets and dramatists drawn from across the

last four centuries. Arguably, their contributions to the discussions surrounding issues such as creativity, self-concept formation and children's play can prove just as valid and valuable as those from more traditionally "academic" sources.

Other areas for additional research which this work has touched upon *en passant* but which have been beyond the actual remit of the study are, of course, sociodramatic play and social class, and sociodramatic play and gender. Arguably, both these areas might benefit from further research. Of special import with regard to the relationship of play and, specifically, creativity, is the notion that sociodramatic play might possibly be even more significant for boys than girls. The research of Clark, Griffing and Johnson (1989), for instance, affirmed the durability of the relationship between play and creativity for their sample as a whole and for boys, but not for girls (p. 87). In like manner, Hutt and Bhavnani (1976) also found gendered differences in their study of creativity and play (p. 218). If play is positively correlated with subsequent male creativity, and if boys are not given sufficient opportunity to engage in pretend play whilst young, might their creative abilities (unlike those of girls) be inhibited in later life? Might this be particularly disconcerting in the light of research which suggests greater attainment by girls than boys in so-called "creative" subjects, "particularly in dance, drama and music" (Mortimore *et al*, 1994, p. 140)?

As mentioned, this research purposely avoided cross-cultural comparisons, again because of logistical considerations – hence one of the reasons for choosing three schools all with predominantly white European catchments. However, this must not be held to imply that the need for such research is any the less urgent. Comparative research into sociodramatic play across a variety of cultures is arguably vital in order to complement such extant work as Feitelson's (1977) "Cross-Cultural Studies of Representational Play". Indeed, such further research might be especially imperative in the light of findings by Gallas (1998) who, whilst acknowledging play's ability to allow



children to experiment with social possibilities, also discovered that racial, socio-economic and cultural differences might militate against shared exploration during imaginative play (cited in Chafel, 2003, p. 220). Such additional research, therefore, might well have implications for the desirability of sensitive adult intervention when racial and social differences work antagonistically towards the furtherance of co-operative pretend play (Chafel, 2003).

It is also worth remembering that my field work occurred exclusively in formal educational environments. Research into aspects of social pretend play may well profit from further studies in non-“educational” settings such as the home, garden and playground. After all, “we should never assume that children play as they do here [i.e. in classrooms] when they are in other, non-institutional environments” (Broadhead, 2004, p. 88). This kind of methodological approach might be of particular utility in the light of my findings in Agincourt School where the children experienced problems with the social aspects of pretend play. Might there be desirable interventionist strategies for children whose opportunity for play outside of formal educational settings is limited and/or not encouraged? Might there be implications for new policies on parenting in order to optimise all children’s access to social symbolic play in domestic and recreational environments? Certainly, the findings of this research – albeit drawn from a relatively narrow catchment – would indicate the need for such issues to be addressed through further empirical study.

My field work, moreover, as well as taking place solely in formal educational settings, also only involved children of broadly the same age range (less than twelve months). However, certain research suggests that greater cognitive and prosocial gains might be made through play in a mixed-age environment where children encounter opportunities to interact with both more and less advanced peers (Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2004). In the light of these findings, surely further research is required into mixed-age

sociodramatic activity in order to further our understanding of optimal play conditions.

One might continue to argue for further research to establish the developmental benefits of sociodramatic play but – in view of the wealth of evidence currently in existence to this end – perhaps the most pressing need is for politicians and policy-makers to read and act upon the research which is already extant. I include in such a catalogue, this piece of work itself which underlines social pretend play's utility in fostering a range of interlocking abilities and "key skills". In order for this utility to be optimised for all children, however, those with political power in our society must demonstrate a preparedness to afford play a profile and prestige currently lacking. Sociodramatic play must be generously resourced within formal educational spheres in terms of: the training provided to teachers and other facilitators; the environments supplied to stimulate and facilitate uninterrupted pretence; and the props, toys and costumes proffered to initiate and sustain focus for high-quality play amongst both boys and girls. Finally, and just as importantly, adequate curricular time must be afforded to such a valuable, enjoyable and essentially human facet of development.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Examples of Research Instruments**

**A. Letters**

**B. Field Notes**

**C. Semi-structured Interviews**

**D. Transcriptions**

**E. Research Diary**

## **APPENDIX A: Illustrative Examples of Letters**



*East View*  
37, Green Lane  
Ockbrook  
Derby  
DE72 3SE

Ms T. Parr  
Elsinor Primary School  
Elsinor  
Derby

25 October 2000

Dear Ms Parr,

As a significant part of my Doctorate in Education programme which I am currently undertaking with the Open University, I have to conduct *an initial research study* which will serve as a foundation for my research work to be conducted over the following two years. The focus of the research is the connection between “child development” and “pretend play”. I regard this as being an extremely important area for research as the intellectual, linguistic, emotional and social benefits of play have, arguably, been somewhat overlooked in recent years as the school curriculum has become increasingly utilitarian, vocationally- and technologically-orientated, and “literacy”- and “numeracy”-driven.

I would, therefore, like to ask your permission to conduct my pilot research with a small number (around 6-8) of your children in your class during the second part of this autumn term. I would, of course, wish to work closely alongside you, consulting and responding to your suggestions and guidance at all stages. The results and findings of the pilot research would, needless to say, be made available to all members of the school community in the hope

that the school, as well as myself, might benefit from the work. Anonymity of individuals in the written report is assured.

The research methods will involve the radio mic'ing and videoing of small numbers of children involved in active play so that their activities can later be transcribed and analysed. I would seek the permission of the relevant parents and/or guardians before carrying out this procedure.

I do hope that you will allow me to work with you and your pupils for the above purposes and I hope that the research work will prove mutually beneficial and enjoyable to all concerned,

Yours,

Pete Meakin BA, MA, PGCE, MAEd

*East View*  
37, Green Lane  
Ockbrook  
Derby  
DE72 3SE

John Allsop  
Chair of the Board of Governors  
Agincourt Primary School  
Agincourt  
Derby

17 January 2002

Dear John,

As a significant part of my Doctorate in Education programme which I am currently undertaking with the Open University, I have to conduct *a third phase of data collection and analysis* which will serve as a further contribution to my research work which has been conducted for the past two and a half years. The focus of the research is the connection between “child development” and “pretend play”. I regard this as being an extremely important area for research as the intellectual, linguistic, emotional and social benefits of play have, arguably, been somewhat overlooked in recent years as the school curriculum has become increasingly utilitarian, vocationally- and technologically-orientated, and “literacy”- and “numeracy”-driven.

I would, therefore, like to ask your permission to conduct my research in the Reception Class of your school during the second part of this spring term. I would, of course, wish to work closely alongside the class teachers, Ms Pollard and Ms. Murphy, consulting and responding to their suggestions at

all stages. The results and findings of the research would, needless to say, be made available to all members of the school community in the hope that the school, as well as myself, might benefit from the work. Anonymity of individuals in the written report is assured.

The research methods involve the radio mic'ing and videoing of small numbers of children involved in active play so that their activities can later be transcribed and analysed. I would seek the permission of the relevant parents and/or guardians before carrying out this procedure.

I do hope that you will permit me access to your school for the above purposes and I hope that the research work will prove mutually beneficial and enjoyable to all concerned,

Yours,

Pete Meakin BA, MA, PGCE, MAEd

**Pete Meakin**

*East View, 37 Green Lane,*  
Ockbrook,  
Derby DE72 3SE  
01332 662523

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am conducting some research in Ms Pollard's/Ms. Murphy's classroom during the course of next week. This research study contributes towards my doctorate in education. The focus of the research is the connection between "child development" and "pretend play". I regard this as being an extremely important area for research as the intellectual, linguistic, emotional and social benefits of play have, arguably, been somewhat overlooked in recent years as the school curriculum has become increasingly constrained by other government priorities.

In order to collect the data required, I need not only to observe the children at play but also to audio-record and video-record their play for later analysis. To enable me to do this, we will connect small "radio mics" to the children and set up a video camera in the classroom. Radio mics are harmless and relatively unobtrusive.

I would, therefore, like to ask your permission to record your child's play in the classroom in this manner. Any information that I collect, plus the results of my findings will, of course, be freely available to you. I shall not use the actual names of the children in writing up the report, thereby ensuring

anonymity of individuals. I would be grateful if you could fill in and return the reply slip to Ms. Pollard/ Ms. Murphy to let me know whether or not you agree to your child participating in this research. Many thanks to you (and your child!) for your help and co-operation,

Yours,

Pete Meakin BA, MA, PGCE, MAEd

---

Dear Ms. Pollard/Ms. Murphy,

I am the parent/guardian of (child's name)\_\_\_\_\_ and I agree/do not agree\* to my child participating in Mr. Meakin's research into pretend play.

Signed\_\_\_\_\_Date\_\_\_\_\_

Name (in block capitals)\_\_\_\_\_

\*delete as applicable

**Pete Meakin**

*East View, 37 Green Lane,  
Ockbrook,  
Derby DE72 3SE  
01332 662523*

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Many, many thanks for allowing to me to record your child whilst engaged in pretend play at school. I will now be spending most of the Easter holiday period transcribing and analysing the data I've collected and, when I have written up the findings, I will be more than happy to let you have a copy should you want one.

From my own point of view, I can only say what a delight it was to be working in Mrs. Pollard's/Mrs. Murphy's class. The children are quite evidently so happy there: they are well-motivated and well-focussed, and everything is carried out in a secure and caring atmosphere. I really enjoyed participating in so many of the class activities and hope it won't be too long before I can once again lend a hand in Asterdale.

At the risk of repeating myself, many thanks for your help and co-operation (and your child's!) in my research project,

Yours,

Pete Meakin

**Pete Meakin**

*East View, 37 Green Lane,*  
Ockbrook,  
Derby DE72 3SE

John Allsop  
Chair of Governors  
Agincourt Primary School  
Agincourt  
Derby

Dear John,

Many, many thanks for allowing me to collect data in your Reception Class and to be part of some of its activities. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in your school and can only say that I am full of admiration for the outstanding work conducted by Ms Pollard and Ms Murphy. Their professionalism, patience and dedication to their children are truly exemplary. The school, as I am sure you are aware, is very fortunate to have them.

In the meantime, if there is any way in which I can be of assistance to your school, please do not hesitate to contact me. Many, many thanks once again,

Yours,

Pete Meakin



**Pete Meakin**

*East View, 37 Green Lane,*  
Ockbrook,  
Derby DE72 3SE

Janet Murphy  
Agincourt Primary School  
Agincourt  
Derby

Dear Janet,

Many, many thanks for all the assistance you gave me in collecting data for my doctorate. I thoroughly enjoyed the time I spent in your class and only hope that I can be of help to you in the future. During the brief period I was privileged to be part of your class I grew very fond of your children and I was thoroughly impressed by your own professionalism, patience and dedication to your children.

I have also included “thankyou” letters to the parents/guardians of all children who were given permission to participate in my research (a copy of which I include for your approval) and I hope you won’t mind distributing them for me. Once again, many thanks for all your help and I hope to see you again before too long,

Yours,

Pete Meakin

## **APPENDIX B: Illustrative Examples of Field Notes**

## FIELD NOTES

School: APS

Date: 19/03/02 Page no.: |

Audio tape no.: |

Side:

Video tape no.: |

TIME

OBSERVATIONS

COMMENTS/

## QUESTIONS

Interestingly, two sets of parents refused to let their child participate.

13.54

Stephen and Josh are  
radio men in the  
restaurant area. Several  
other children also seem  
interested in the radio men.  
he

The radio men prove to be more  
of a distraction than the video.

13.56

As previously, my presence near the play  
corner seems to fascinate the children. I sit  
down in an attempt to make myself as  
unobtrusive as possible. Josh & Stephen still  
insist on bringing food (+ a cup of tea!) to me.

14.00

The two boys do not readily engage  
in shared play. Their preference seems  
to be for solitary play or playing  
with an adult.

Is there a clear need with some of these  
children for adult intervention in their play?

14.07

I swapped the radio men onto Annie  
and Megan in the hope that they would  
engage in shared play. Annie and Megan's  
preference still seems to be for solitary play.

Should I have been more explicit  
in requesting dyads of friends?

14.11

Megan now brings me a cup of tea.

Megan's play, also, seems overwhelmingly to  
be of a solitary nature.

(Jordan and Joe insisted on turning many of the toys in the restaurant area  
on to the floor before going out to play)

The social abilities of these children, on  
the whole, appear significantly less than  
those of the two classes I have previously  
researched. At the moment, their relative  
lack of social abilities appears commensurate  
with their relative inability to engage  
in shared pretence.

14.55

Joe and Callum now with radio men.  
Kieren & Hollie also in the restaurant  
with them.

Intermittently, Callum does play with  
children "across the counter".

The play

The first instance of prolonged  
shared pretence?

# FIELD NOTES

School: HPS

Date: 31/10/02 Page no.: 5

Audio tape no.: 2

Side: B

Video tape no.: 3

TIME

OBSERVATIONS

COMMENTS/  
QUESTIONS

13.40

Lewis & Joe C. now with the mice on  
& once again, the two are able to play  
on their own while I record them. Both  
boys immediately begin to play - it seems  
to be some kind of cooking game. ~~Both seem~~

Both seem to be using  
egregious speech. Both  
seem initially aware of  
my presence.

13.42

Lewis seems to be constantly sneezing!  
Both boys comment on this.

Both boys seem more  
inclined towards solitary  
play than social play

13.44

In their talk about cutting fingers, both boys  
seem sensitive to turn-taking.

13.45

A slight interruption from other boys passing  
through the atrium.

13.47

Both boys seem now to have embarked upon  
successful, sustained sociodramatic play. Joe C.  
tells a passing ECO - "We're having tea".

Interesting, yet again,  
the extent to which the  
nature of the props  
affects the content of the  
play. Note, then, the  
critical importance of  
"props" in approaching  
some form of symbolic  
activity.

13.55

Lewis makes the sound of the doorbell?  
Joe C. appears to be playing the more dominant  
role.

The "eating" series are very  
loud - they're not just  
pretending to eat but they're  
also signalling the fact  
that "they're eating".

13.59

Joe C. seems to introduce a more "adventurous"  
& "active" storyline - they've got to put a fire  
out. Off they go with two "hoovers" - & they  
ingeniously use the "hose" of the vacuum  
cleaner as the "hose" of their fire engines!

Note - this is done "off-  
camera" - they "drive off"  
into another area to  
put the fire out,

## **APPENDIX C: Illustrative Examples of Semi-Structured Interviews and Two Versions of Questions Asked**

TRANSCRIPTION<sup>5</sup>

## Transcript

## Transcription Notes

Semi-structured interview with Class TeacherMs. "Parr"

1. <sup>Andrea</sup> ~~Andy~~ has really taken off with the routines  
2. of the class. . . .
3. The language is really coming out. . . She finds  
4. the letter sounds really hard. . . If she writes  
5. something she can then tell somebody what it  
6. says and it's important. . .
7. I picked Colin as one of your people because  
8. intellectually he's a lot higher up but in play  
9. he's very shy. . . In play he used to sit on  
10. the very corner and do his own thing and  
11. listen. Now I've seen he interacts a lot  
12. more, especially with Edward. He finds Edward  
13. an easy one because Edward's so bossy and  
14. into everything it's easy for Colin to play  
15. with him because Edward will say, "do this,"  
16. do that" and Colin's like, "Oh, I'll do that then. . .
17. It's the language development because some of  
18. them have speech problems. . . it's understanding  
19. you've got an audience really. When you're in  
20. play a lot of the children will say something  
21. and it doesn't come out as a sentence and  
22. other children are very frantic like, "What do  
23. you mean? What are you talking about? That  
24. doesn't make sense." You know and they get  
25. that, "Oh, I've not said it properly". So they  
26. get that feedback from what they're saying.  
27. Whereas as a teacher you probably understood

Note <sup>Andrea</sup> ~~Andy~~'s "obsession" with  
playing at "School" and with her  
taking the role of teacher.  
<sup>Andrea</sup> ~~Andy~~'s literary development -  
manifested and rehearsed in  
sociodramatic play?

Colin's interpersonal  
development lagging behind  
his development in other  
intelligences? (See Gardner.)

Edward "scaffolding"  
Colin's interpersonal  
development? (See Bruner.)

Interconnecting the  
linguistic and the social?  
cognitive  
Understanding the/perspective  
of others? (See Tan Niam)

Benefits of interaction with  
peers over interaction with  
adults?

<sup>5</sup> Key: \_\_\_\_\_ underlining indicates any features commented upon

(.) brief pause

(you sit) transcription uncertain: a guess

( ) unclear speech

Lizzy  
and we

Michael  
don't dare aligned words overlap

# TRANSCRIPTION<sup>1</sup>

HPS

Page no. 1

## Transcript

## Transcription Notes

(Interview with Paulo & Jeff)  
Paulo

Jeff

Mr. M.

1.

Who does you like playing at best?  
"Goodies" or "buddies"?

2.

3. Goodies

Goodies

4.

Why do you like playing goodies?

5.

'Cause they always win

6.

7.

So what kind of goodies might  
you be in your play?

8.

I want to be a knight

9.

10. I want to be a spaceman

11.

Did one of you say you were  
going to be frightening when you  
were playing?

12.

13.

14. Yeh. I was pretending

Is this Paulo

emphasising the fact that he  
wasn't really attempting to be  
frightening? The picture readers  
say such aggression "safe"?

<sup>1</sup> Key: \_\_\_\_\_ underlining indicates any features commented upon

(you sit) transcription uncertain: a guess

Lizzy  
and we

Michael  
don't dare aligned words overlap

(.) brief pause

() unclear speech

## **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

***[N.B.: Earlier version]***

### **Questions for the *teacher***

1. How do you facilitate your pupils' pretend play?
2. What do you think some of the educational benefits are for children engaging in pretend play?
3. What are some of the educational benefits of your interventionist strategies in children's pretend play?
4. Are there any educational benefits to be gained through non-teacher-intervention in children's pretend play?
5. Would you wish your pupils to be able to spend more or less time in pretend play activities?
6. Why?

### **Questions for the *pupil***

- I saw you playing at \_\_\_\_\_. What did you enjoy about playing at that?
- At one point in your play with [name] \_\_\_\_\_, I noticed \_\_\_\_\_. Why was this?
- Do you prefer playing on your own or with your friends?
- Are there some things at school which seem like work and some which seem like play? Which are they? Which do you prefer?



## SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

*[N.B.: Final version]*

### Questions for the *teacher*

- How do you facilitate your pupils' pretend play?
- What do you think some of the educational benefits are for children engaging in pretend play?
- What are some of the educational benefits of your interventionist strategies in children's pretend play?
- Are there any educational benefits to be gained through non-teacher-intervention in children's pretend play?
- Would you wish your pupils to be able to spend more or less time in pretend play activities?
- Why?

### Questions for the *pupil*

- When \_\_\_\_\_ you created \_\_\_\_\_. Why did you do this?
- I noticed you said \_\_\_\_\_. Why?
- I saw you playing with \_\_\_\_\_. Who do you enjoy playing with most? Why?
- At one point in your play with [name] \_\_\_\_\_, I noticed \_\_\_\_\_. Why was this?
- At \_\_\_\_\_ the play broke down. Why do you think this was?
- I saw you playing at \_\_\_\_\_. Do you prefer playing "goodies" or "baddies"? Why? Who is your favourite character?
- I saw you playing at \_\_\_\_\_. What did you enjoy about playing at that? If you enjoyed it so much, why weren't you laughing?

## **APPENDIX D: Illustrative Examples of Transcriptions including Coding Conventions Employed**

TRANSCRIPTION<sup>5</sup>

## Transcript

Edward and Colin playing at "School"EdwardColin

1. Oh, can I have a seat  
 2. Can I have a seat.  
 3. Yep.  
 4. For your writing. I'll draw  
 5. something for you.  
 6. No, I'll draw something  
 7. No I'll draw something.  
 8. No that's not a pencil.  
 9. Now this letter write today  
 10. it's "a". And this an apple.  
 11. If you finish it really I'll  
 12. give you a seat O.K.? (.)  
 13. Seat colouring. If I do  
 14. everything right do I get  
 15. everything or  
 16. No you don't get everything  
 17. until you do it very very O.K.  
 18. seat and stay in the lines  
 19. Two wow's (.) and some  
 20. in here. (.)  
 21. There.  
 22. No.  
 23. Oh.  
 24. You've got to do that (there)  
 25. Oh.  
 26. So you don't get any just a  
 27. smiley face  
 28. Yeh but you see when I  
 29. I want (too) fast well this part

Eps

## Transcription Notes

Presumably, a seat book. Edward  
 (as the teacher) is handing out play  
 booklets  
 ← No, I think not  
 a "seat stamp"

Edward very much assuming the  
 role of authoritarian teacher.  
 (cf. Vygotsky & play as "wish-  
 fulfillment")

This appears to be a stamp for  
 seat work.

Colin's wish to please?

Details reproduced from teacher's  
 earlier instruction. (Play  
 reinforcing curricular learning -  
 cf. interview with Ms. Parr)

<sup>5</sup> Key: \_\_\_\_\_ underlining indicates any features commented upon

(.) brief pause

(you sit) transcription uncertain: a guess

( ) unclear speech

Lizzy  
 and we

Michael  
 don't dare aligned words overlap

TRANSCRIPTION<sup>5</sup>

## Transcript

EPS

(2)

## Transcription Notes

- Edward
1. only gave me a very good  
2. did you know
3. Do your writing then at the  
4. bottom.
5. Yeh, I'll do my best writing  
6. ever.
7. Then you'll get two.  
8. Two?
9. And not even four.  
10. Yeh?  
11. What little table?
12. Colin now makes noises as he forms his letters, following the movement of his pencil. Can this be classified as a version of egocentric speech? Or is Colin playing the role of a pupil less capable than himself?
13. No. I said lots of "a's".  
14. Now do it please.  
15. I'll do this next.  
16. I'll get get some stamps.  
17. 'Cause Edward has some  
18. and I want one.  
19. Oh, there are super "a's"  
20. Oh, a good job Edward  
21. said "a".
22. Miss Parr this is my  
23. scrap book. This is my  
24. scrap book.  
25. Now then. I'll do a bit of  
26. writing.  
27. Edward?  
28. Yeh.

Edward still convincing as the authoritarian teacher. The character of the compliant, eager-to-please pupil is very close to Colin's own personality.

This is addressed to another pupil.

Colin seems unable to refer to Edward as the teacher. ~~Downline~~ Is his inability to do this indicative of the difficulties Colin appears to experience with sociodramatic play?

This addressed to another pupil.

Colin playing a pupil mimicking the teacher's phraseology?

Colin again making noises as he forms his letters. Edward goes to show this to the teacher.

<sup>5</sup> Key: \_\_\_\_\_ underlining indicates any features commented upon

(you sit) transcription uncertain: a guess

Lizzy  
and we

Michael  
don't dare aligned words overlap

(.) brief pause

() unclear speech

TRANSCRIPTION<sup>5</sup>

## Transcript

## Transcription Notes

- Edward Colin
1. No. Not all capital ones.
  2. Little's? (.)
  3. Now then can you draw this?
  4. I'll put lots of stamps. One.
  5. One. Two three four five six
  6. seven
  7. And that is the wearing out.
  8. Just do one of these.
  9. Is that good? Is a good one?
  10. Very good? Smiling face, wow
  11. or neat? For me.
  12. See?
  13. Do I get any?
  14. Right then. You didn't do (.)
  15. your best as you can
  16. Where do you where do you get
  17. that card from?
  18. You get all of them (not) just
  19. three. No five. You do get
  20. six. One two three four five
  21. six. And you have seven.
  22. Eight, Nine. Ten. You have
  23. ten stamps please.
  24. Well done this is neat.

Colin is asking which type of stamp he'll get.

The "teacher" once again refuses to give unconditional praise to his pupil. Perhaps as a result of this Colin & seems to lose interest in the play and turns his attention to another pupil. Perhaps in an attempt to continue the scenario, Edward now lavishes stamps on Colin's work!

Colin then re-engages in the play!

(The Parr now calls the session to an end.)

<sup>5</sup> Key: \_\_\_\_\_ underlining indicates any features commented upon

(you sit) transcription uncertain: a guess

Lizzy  
and we

Michael  
don't dare 2004 red words overlap

(.) brief pause

() unclear speech

TRANSCRIPTION<sup>1</sup>

H/S Page no. 4

## Transcript

## Transcription Notes

Alice

1. Do you want this one?
2. Aida's got this one
3. He was sad because the telephone
4. Or the telephone keeps
5. Say hello bunny  
*Bunny points to*
6. Say nice words
7. And then he got a piece of cake
8. And he got dirty after that
9. yummy scrummy cake
10. And then mum come down and said
11. "Where's my teddy?" said baby
12. Painted the red round the chocolate cake
13. Then he phoned him up
14. Quick and quick and quick he did it
15. And then he ran [ panting ]
16. And then he got the telephone
17. He was on his way on a motorbike
18. His rabbit. And then he thought
19. "Ugh, ugh ugh"
20. "Stupid old telephone," he said
21. "So more singing," he said
22. "Hello, hello," and he said, "Hello"
23. Everyone knew he was happy now.
24. He was happy. He was happy
25. And then he ate all the cake.
26. Happily ever after all shared the cake
27. Did you like this story? Did you?

Again, 'rules' of particular genre appear to be adhered to (+ reinforced?).

"Sound FX"!

Generally - appropriate ending with generally-appropriate phraseology.

<sup>1</sup> Key: \_\_\_\_\_ underlining indicates any features commented upon

(you sit) transcription uncertain: a guess

Lizzy  
and we

Michael  
don't dare aligned words overlap

(.) brief pause

( ) unclear speech

## **APPENDIX E: Illustrative Extract from Research Diary**

## **RESEARCH DIARY - extract**

**20<sup>th</sup> June 2000**

First used the periodicals room at Derby University library – very pleased with the number of relevant journals they stock.

**8<sup>th</sup> July 2000**

E-mailed my tutor – I’m now beginning to realise that many of the things I was seeking to “prove” about pretend social play have, in fact, already been “proven” – the way it assists and develops children’s perspective-taking abilities (Hickling, Wellman and Gottfried, 1997; Tan-Niam, 1998), how it helps construct identity (Berg, 1999), and so on. What’s interesting about the studies I’ve read so far, however, is that they all appear to approach the subject from an essentially psychological, empirical perspective. Can my study seek to discover how these concepts and aids to development are, in actuality, operationalised? What does perspective-taking really look like during children’s sociodramatic play? What instances are there of children constructing identities?

**13<sup>th</sup> July 2000**

Received an email from my tutor – and the above approach seems to be acceptable. Great. I think one of the things I’ve now got to do is constantly to log which research fits into which pigeon-hole: both *substantively* (i.e. which look at perspective-taking, which at cognitive growth, which at identity construction, etc.) and *methodologically* (i.e. which adopt the essentially empirical approach and which, if any, utilise the ethnographic approach which I am proposing [I hope none do!]).

**6<sup>th</sup> September 2000**

E-mailed my tutor re. progress on PRO2 and detailed the five “play and development” categories which appear to be arising out of my reading.